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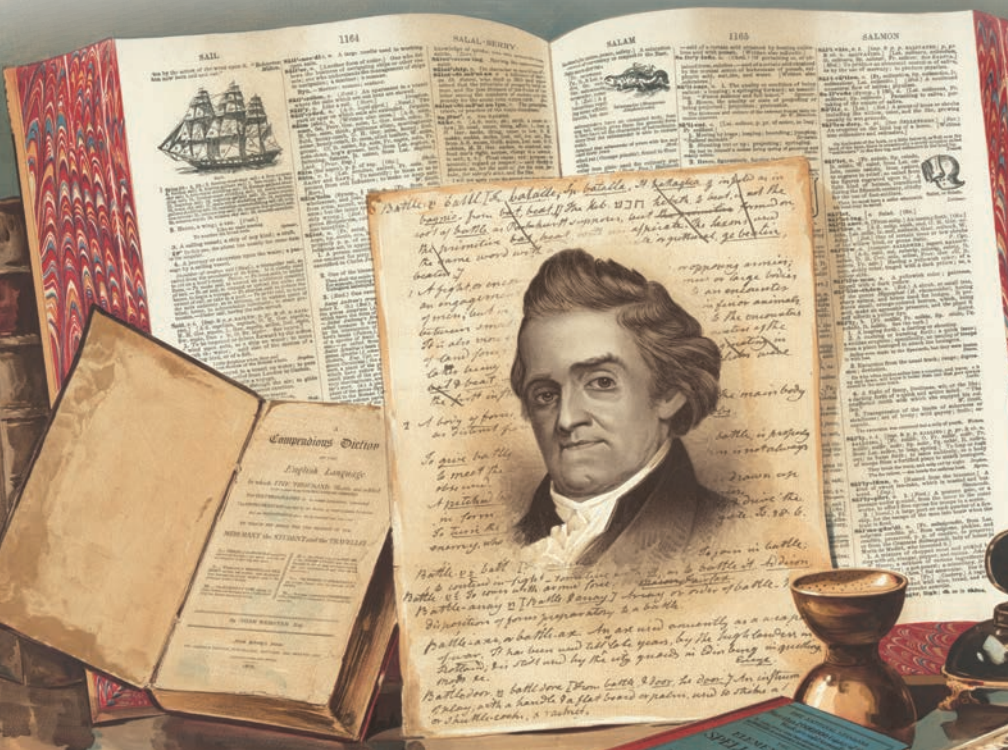
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Linguistics

English in America

A Linguistic History

Course Guidebook

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Dr. Schilling is keenly interested in American literature as well as American linguistics, especially in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. She specializes in the study of language variation and change in American English dialects, including regional, ethnic, and gender-based language varieties. Dr. Schilling's main expertise is stylistic variation: how and why individuals use different language styles as they shape and reshape personal, interpersonal, and group identities and relations. She is the author of *Sociolinguistic Fieldwork*, coauthor of *American English: Dialects and Variation* (third edition), and coeditor of *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change* (second edition).

Dr. Schilling also conducts forensic linguistic investigation of speaker and author profiling and authorship attribution, and she has used her expertise in American English dialect variation in casework. She has been a guest on a number of NPR shows, including WAMU's *Diane Rehm Show*, WNYC's *Leonard Lopate Show*, and WNPR's *Colin McEnroe Show*. Articles about her studies in dialectology and forensic linguistics have appeared in *The Washington Post* and other media outlets. Dr. Schilling is an active member of the Linguistic Society of America and the American Dialect Society (ADS), where she annually casts her vote for the ADS Word of the Year. Her favorite word is "mugwump," a classic, if now defunct, Americanism. ■

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English in America: A Linguistic History

Scope

How many American dialects of English are there, and how did they form? How did French influence the Southern grammatical construction “get down” (from a vehicle)? Why are there traces of Scots-Irish in American English? What kind of impact did Native American languages, and the immigrant languages of the 19th century, have on the development of American English? What are the roots of African American English, and how different is it from other varieties of American English? Is Spanish a threat to American English? And what’s the role of American English versus British English as the language increasingly spreads across the globe, and as it reaches into cyberspace? All of these and more topics belong to the interesting but rarely told history of English in America. This course sets out to tell you this story, from the time English speakers first set up residence in Jamestown in 1607 to the present day—the age of mass immigration, globalization, and Internet communication. But there’s a caveat: The story of American English is still being written.

Lecture 1

We start with a big-picture overview of the American English dialect map, asking ourselves as we explore, what is a dialect? And, perhaps just as importantly, what *isn’t* a dialect? We’ll learn about the complexity and intricate patterns underlying all linguistic systems, from those considered standard and “proper” to dialects based on region, social class, and ethnicity that we think of as “nonstandard.” We approach language variation from a scientific perspective—from the viewpoint of sociolinguistics, the study of the intricate interrelation between language variation and cultural, interpersonal, and personal identity.

Lecture 2

We also approach our investigation of the development of American English within the context of the development of postcolonial varieties of English more generally. We consider the common stages that English dialects go through as they are transformed from British offshoots to national dialects

in their own right. In American English, the foundation stage begins when people from various British dialect areas establish settlements in East Coast dialect hubs such as Jamestown, Boston, and Philadelphia. We'll see how the initial English dialects, dialect mixing, and contact with various languages—including Native American languages, Spanish, French, Dutch, and the West African languages of slaves—all left an enduring mark on today's American English.

Lecture 3

We consider next how the English settlers gradually transformed themselves from colonists to American citizens and how English in America became American English. In the exonormative stabilization stage, the myriad dialects in America begin to coalesce and a new dialect begins to be noticed, although British ways of speaking are still held up as the norm. Differentiation from British English continues into the nativization stage, and we see an explosion of linguistic creativity, especially in the area of dialect words—Americanisms. Meanwhile, English in England undergoes innovations of its own, and the older form of English originally brought to the 13 colonies is transformed into the British Received Pronunciation that still holds sway today.

Lecture 4

Noah Webster, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain are all key figures in the next stage in the historical development of American English: the endonormative stabilization stage. This is when America begins looking inward, not to England, for its language standards, and the new norms are set down on paper—in the form of dictionaries, spelling books, and grammars—and celebrated in a profusion of distinctly American literary works.

Lecture 5

Our journey continues with the westward expansion of American English, as New England spreads across the North, the south extends to the southwest, and people in the middle increasingly intermingle. Along the way, dialect mixing and leveling lead to increasing standardization—or at least the ideal of a single, uniform standard—and general American English is born. But where is it, and who speaks it? Is it a regional dialect located in

the Midwest or West? Or is it an a-regional variety for use in situations that call for a “neutral” standard?

Lecture 6

Once we reach the West Coast, we pause for a minute to consider how dialect maps are made. How do linguists who study dialects—sociolinguists, dialectologists, and dialect geographers—get data to make their dialect maps? How do they decide where to draw dialect lines? On what kinds of language features are their maps based, and what kinds of pictures work best for fully and accurately displaying the geographic array of dialect variation?

Lecture 7

We then build out our map of American dialect regions into three dimensions—into cultural space—as we consider how the languages of the many immigrants who poured into America in the 19th and early 20th centuries were transformed into distinctive ethnic dialects of American English and left their mark on American English more generally.

Lecture 8

Next, we explore the indelible linguistic and culture effects of the peoples of West African descent who were brought to America against their will, as slaves, but who went on to develop a uniquely rich and expressive language variety that today is emulated by young people throughout the United States and across the world: African American English.

Lecture 9

As we move into 20th-century America, we consider the effects of changing channels of communication on American English—changing movement patterns of peoples and information. We consider population movements from rural to urban areas and back again, the civil rights movement, and the increasing influence of Hollywood media and the dawn of the Internet age.

Lecture 10

What’s the official language of the United States? What should it be? We examine American language policies and attitudes from a historical perspective. We see how sentiment has shifted back and forth over the

centuries, from periods of relative tolerance for non-English languages in the United States to times of heightened fear for the “safety” of English in America and concurrent attempts at stricter language legislation. We see how taking a long view enables us to see America’s current linguistic situation in a new light. We also pause to pay tribute to the hundreds of Native American languages that have vanished from American soil and to consider the scientific and cultural losses that language loss entails.

Lecture 11

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, America has seen a tremendous upsurge in immigration, much as it did at the dawn of the 20th century. This time, the cultural groups are different—primarily people from Latin America and Asia—and the proportions are even higher. We consider the effects of these new immigrant groups on American English and confront a fear that is facing many native speakers of American English: Is Spanish taking over America, and do we need to enact language policies to prevent this? We also explore the native English varieties developed by people of Latin American descent in the United States, highlighting their linguistic systematicity and cultural value.

Lecture 12

Our journey concludes as American English reaches the differentiation stage. Secure on the world stage, America can now look inward and focus on the intranational linguistic and cultural diversity that has been there since the outset. We’ll see that regional dialect differentiation is actually increasing, not receding, even in the Internet age. We’ll also see how various cultural groups have preserved, enhanced, and even revived community and ethnic dialects. Finally, we consider the development of English more generally, as it continues to spread across the globe.

As English becomes a world language, we may ask ourselves, are we headed for another Tower of Babel? Or will English continue to sprout new dialects as it spreads, just as it did in the British Isles beginning more than a century and a half ago and as it has done in America for the past 400-plus years?

Defining American English Dialects

This course explores linguistics, the scientific study of human language, and, more specifically, sociolinguistics: the study of language in its social setting, in all of its rich variety across geographic and social space and in its interrelation to cultural, social, interpersonal, and personal identity. In this lecture, you'll learn what dialects are—and what they are not—approximately where the major regional dialects of American English are situated, and how American English became different from British English, as well as how the different dialects of American English became different from one another.

Dialects of American English

- Where would you draw the dialect lines on a U.S. map? If you're like most Americans, you probably thought of the South right away and drew a mental dialect line around the southeastern United States. For some people, this line extends as far west as Texas, while for others, Texas is its own dialect area. Florida is usually left out of the Southern dialect region, because it's considered to be a region of dialect transplants, including retired people from the North and people of Hispanic heritage from the Caribbean Islands.
- Beyond the South, you might have also drawn a "North" or a "New England" dialect region. Or you might have gotten more specific and labeled the speech varieties of certain cities within these larger regions—maybe Chicago in the Midwest and maybe New York City and Boston on the East Coast.
- Your dialect lines probably get fuzzier as you think about the Western United States, though you might have indicated a California English or West Coast English region. Hawaii and Alaska are pretty far away from the mainland United States, so you probably wouldn't have grouped them in with any of the continental dialect divisions.



- It turns out that people's mental maps of American dialect regions align pretty closely with the dialect lines laid out by sociolinguistics and dialect geographers. The most important dialect line in the United States is in fact between the South and the non-South. The dividing line doesn't exactly follow the Mason-Dixon Line, but it's pretty close. Essentially, the line that sets off the South starts between Maryland and Virginia and runs through southern West Virginia, Kentucky, southern Missouri, southern Oklahoma, and Texas.
- The Northern dialect line separates New York State from Pennsylvania and runs through northern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa and extends westward into eastern Nebraska, South Dakota, and all of North Dakota. Many dialect geographers also draw a Midland dialect area between the North and the South. This area encompasses the parts of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma that aren't situated neatly in the North or South.

- In addition to the major dialect areas of the U.S. East Coast—the North, Midland, and South—there are smaller dialects and subdialects. Eastern New England, western New England, and the mid-Atlantic each form their own dialect area. It also turns out that Appalachia and Texas count as subdialects of Southern English. They share many features with the wider South, but they also have some differences that make them distinct.
- Your dialect mapping instincts were also correct if you gave some cities their own dialect labels. New York City counts as its own dialect area, and so does Pittsburgh.
- As we move westward through the United States, the Midland dialect area fans out into a large Western dialect area, though the North remains intact through the center of the country, and the South spreads through Texas. There are also some recognizably distinctive dialects on the West Coast. So, if you labeled California as a dialect center on your map, you're right. Dialectologists also mark Portland English in the Pacific Northwest.
- It's also true that certain regions and cities have to be separated from surrounding dialect areas—for example, Florida, Charleston, and New Orleans, each of which is too linguistically distinctive to just throw in with the rest of the South.
- Finally, we need to keep in mind that dialect lines, and lines between languages, are not political lines. There are parts of the far northern United States where a more Canadian brand of English is spoken and parts of the southern United States where Spanish holds pretty much equal footing with English.

Standard versus Nonstandard English

- When you labeled your dialect map, chances are that you made some value judgments. In popular perception, some ways of using language are better than others. We learn in school that it's better to use standard English than to speak a dialect—that standard English is logical and correct while dialects are illogical and incorrect.

- It turns out, though, that the popular view of how languages and dialects work is inaccurate. There are different ways of looking at language. A prescriptive approach to language is focused on rules for proper usage that have been prescribed for us and codified in grammar books. But there's another view—a descriptive approach. Using this approach, we study what people actually do with language, regardless of what prescribed standards hold.
 - If we approach language not as grammarians—as guardians of proper usage—but as scientists—as linguists—then we need to study human language as it really is, not how we think it should be. Linguistics is a science, so linguists study how language is actually used. And this means studying language in all its variety by studying as many languages and dialects as we can—not just major world languages or standard English, but also dialects like Southern English and African American English.
- To linguists, the term “dialect” is simply a neutral label to refer to any variety of any language.
- Linguists who focus specifically on variation are called sociolinguists, because they focus on language in its social settings, whether across geographic space, across cultural groups, across different individuals, or even within individuals, across different interaction types, or even different moments in a single conversation.
 - When we approach language study as sociolinguists—when we study language variation systematically and scientifically—we find that the popular view of dialects as subordinate to standard language just doesn't hold up. In other words, all varieties are equal. Granted, they might not be socially equal, but they're all linguistically equal.
 - To linguists, the term “dialect” is simply a neutral label to refer to any variety of any language. It doesn't matter what the social label might be—standard or nonstandard, regional or social, unusual or normal. Dialects are not derivative or deficient. They're full-fledged, intricately patterned

systems just like the standard. They're equally capable of expressing any concept, thought, or emotion we need to convey. And they all have rules, whether or not they have rule books or written grammars.

Languages versus Dialects

- If all dialects have rules, and all dialects are equally valid linguistically, then why are some language varieties called “dialects” while others are called “languages”? Just like the difference between a “standard” dialect and a “nonstandard” one, the reasons are almost purely social and political—not linguistic.
- There's no set linguistic dividing line between what counts as a dialect of a language and what counts as a language itself. Also, what counts as a language can change over time. And what holds for languages holds for language varieties, or dialects. The language varieties and linguistic features that get to count as standard, proper, or prestigious also change over time—and vary across space.
- It's people, not linguistic features or language systems, who decide which language varieties are bona fide languages and which ones are offshoots. Linguistically, they're all on a level playing field: Every variety of a language is a dialect of that language, from the most socially prestigious to the most disparaged, and every dialect is as good as the next.
- A dialect is not the same thing as an accent. The term “accent” refers to pronunciations, but dialects are more than just pronunciations. Dialects vary on all levels of language, from pronunciations (phonology) to words (lexical items) to sentence structures (grammar).
- Dialects are also not the same thing as slang. Slang is a tricky notion to define, but it mostly has to do with words or lexical items, not so much with the other elements of dialect, pronunciation, and grammar. Slang words are also typically short-lived, though not always, and are used purposefully to show that you're “in with the in-group.” Slang is also usually associated with young people. On the other hand, dialect words are used by people of all ages and can be around for

generations, and they may or may not be understandable to wider groups of people.

The Formation of Dialect Differences

- A key ingredient in the formation of dialect differences is separation. When people who speak a single language are physically separated from one another, such as the early American colonists and those who remained in England, their ways of using language diverge, too. People who venture to new places come into contact with new phenomena, new peoples, new languages, and unfamiliar dialects, and all of these encounters shape the way they speak.
- At the same time, all languages are constantly changing, whether or not they're dramatically impacted by external influences—and whether we like it or not. For example, the dialect gap between American English and British English is a product not only of American



innovations in a new world, but also of dialect changes in the old world, in British English.

- Another factor is identification. People's languages are a part of who they are—of their sense of nation, community, and individual—and so are their dialects. American English probably wouldn't be as distinctive as it is today if the colonies had never declared their independence from England. Political independence and cultural independence very often foster linguistic independence. And there are some ways in which Americans purposefully made American English more different from British English, such as creating spelling differences and inventing new words.
- There's also the matter of diversification. When a nation like the United States becomes secure in its identity, we can move past our focus on presenting a united front. We can begin to pay more attention to our internal diversity. America has always been a country of diverse peoples, languages, and language varieties, but it's only been in comparatively recent decades that American dialect differences have come to symbolize important intranational cultural differences.
- Finally, in thinking about the future of dialect differentiation, we need to think about the forces of globalization. English is a world language, and its reach keeps on spreading. It remains to be seen what's going to happen to English as it's used by more people of more diverse mother tongues in increasingly far-flung locations—and as it's used across various media, including radio, television, the Internet, and social media.

Suggested Reading

Algeo, ed., *The Cambridge History of the English Language*.

Labov, Ash, and Boberg, *The Atlas of North American English*.

(Companion website: <http://www.atlas.mouton-content.com/>)

Wolfram and Schilling, *American English*. (Companion website: <http://americanenglishwiley.com/>)

Wolfram and Ward, eds., *American Voices*.

Questions to Consider

1. What dialect or dialects of English do you speak? Think about cultural, community, and “in-group” ways of speaking in addition to regional dialects. Prior to this lecture, did you think that you spoke without an accent or dialect? What would you say now?
2. Changing language standards is a bit like changing fashions. In what ways is this a good metaphor, and in what ways might it fall short? What kinds of differences are there in how we adopt, use, and evaluate language and how we adopt, use, and judge clothes, shoes, and hairstyles?

The Foundations of American English

A lot has happened to the English language, in both England and America, since English ships landed at Jamestown Island in the Chesapeake Bay the early 1600s. American English started out as British English—but a very different kind of British English than what we're used to today. And the first English-speaking settlers in America didn't just bring English with them. They brought English regional dialects. And these British English dialects are the first ingredient in the formation of American English dialects in its earliest, formative years, in what we can think of as its foundation stage.

Stages of New English Dialect Formation

- Linguist Edgar Schneider has studied the historical development of a variety of English dialects around the world, such as Australian English, Indian English, and American English. He found that these dialects typically pass through similar stages of development, despite the very different end results. This is because English is shaped by the same types of factors whenever it's transported from a country where it's been a long-standing language into a new land.
- These factors are both linguistic and contextual. They have to do with matters of language and dialect contact and with natural forces that drive languages to change. At the same time, languages and dialects are shaped by sociopolitical situations and, very importantly, by attitude and identity. How we speak is very much a product of who we are, who we perceive ourselves to be, and who we want to be—and how we feel about ourselves and about other people who don't speak, act, or think the way we do.
- Schneider's five stages of new English dialect formation are foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation. The stages are distinct, but they can't always be neatly separated, and it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint exact chronologies. This is especially the case in a big country like America,

where English didn't reach the entire territory all at once, but instead spread across the land in different phases and at different time periods.

- Foundation: In this phase, an established language—for example, British English—begins sowing its seeds in a new land. Speakers bring dialects of the language with them, and the linguistic effects of these first dialects, called founder effects, can have a profound effect on shaping the new dialect and its subdialects. Transplanted dialects also mix with one another. This often results in the leveling out of dialect differences, in the creation of a widespread, sort of “neutral” variety for general use—what's known as a koine. A third ingredient is language contact, including lots of borrowing from indigenous peoples in the new land.
- Exonormative stabilization: In this stage, the linguistic mixture settles a bit, and a new language variety begins to stabilize. Differences continue to be leveled out as dialect mixing and language contact continue. There's also linguistic creativity, and people begin to notice new words and new usages they associate with the new colony—so-called -isms, as in Americanisms. Typically, new linguistic usages are not well liked, because people's linguistic orientations, and their political and cultural orientations, are toward the home country—for example, Great Britain.
- Nativization: In this stage, the emerging dialect become an entity in its own right. English as used in India becomes Indian English, and English in America becomes American English. Leveling and borrowing continue apace, and there is an explosion of linguistic creativity that further widens the gulf between the new dialect and old-world variety. But the home language doesn't stand still either, and as time progresses, it too undergoes changes, often in quite different directions from how the language is changing in other lands. Exonormative stabilization persists until people who speak the new dialect gain enough self-confidence to follow their own linguistic norms.
- Endonormative stabilization: In this phase, the newly established dialect is finally given credit as a bona fide language variety; it's

no longer considered a substandard offshoot. This stage, a sort of declaration of linguistic independence, tends to follow on the heels of political independence. But it doesn't coincide exactly. The effects of established language standards can persist for a long time.

- Differentiation: Finally, an established new English dialect can enter a fifth stage. This happens when the speakers of the new dialect—now citizens of a new nation—become secure in their new identity. They can then turn their focus from presenting a united political and linguistic front to considering their own international cultural and linguistic diversity. Cultural and community groups develop a new sense of pride, a heightened sense of unique identity, and often a more distinctive linguistic identity. So, more distinctive, intranational dialects arise.
- Schneider's examination of the historical development of world Englishes leads to a somewhat surprising conclusion: As English spreads across the world, it diversifies—across countries and, over time, within countries.

As English spreads across the world, it diversifies—across countries and, over time, within countries.

The Foundation Stage of English in America

- The first English-speaking settlement in America was Jamestown, in the Tidewater area of Virginia. Most of the early English-speaking settlers in the Tidewater region came from southern and southwestern England. They were Cavaliers, Royalists who left England as a result of the English Civil War that unseated their king. They were gentrified, conservative, and oriented toward England despite their distance.
- Also traveling along with the Cavaliers were people of a very different social class: indentured servants who received passage to the New World in exchange for a period of servitude on the wealthy Cavaliers' extensive farmlands.

- About 40,000 Cavaliers and servants arrived in the first three-quarters of the 17th century, and their ways of life, and ways of talking, were to have persistent founder effects on Southern culture and on the Southern dialect.
- Another key early settlement area was New England. In 1620, the *Mayflower* brought Pilgrims to Plymouth Rock, and shortly thereafter, in 1623, the colony of Cape Ann was founded. This colony included people from southwestern England, too, just like Jamestown to the south. But the Cape Ann colony never really took off, and its influence was quickly eclipsed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony, founded in 1628.
- The overwhelming majority of people who made up this settlement came from southeast England, particularly East Anglia, the area on the southeast coast directly above London. They were mostly Puritans fleeing England for religious reasons. And while they might not have been quite as aristocratic as the Virginia settlers, they were pretty high in status and were typically well educated or skilled craftspeople. These were the original Yankees, moralistic and tenacious.
- Around 20,000 Puritans poured into New England between 1629 and 1641—not nearly as numerous as the Cavaliers, but nonetheless highly influential in their dialect region. They worked hard, and they prospered, and spread throughout New England into Connecticut and what would later become New Hampshire. Again, they were mostly from southeastern England—so still Southern English, like in Tidewater Virginia, but from a different part of the South, with some slightly different speechways.
- New England wasn't completely monolithic, and early on, cultural and linguistic differences developed between eastern and western New England. Geography and ways of making a living played a big role. People who settled in western New England became focused on the land, on farming, while those who settled in the east were oriented to the sea, toward fishing and whaling. Or if they were wealthier people

living in what would soon become the urban center of New England, Boston, they oriented toward England, especially toward London, its political and cultural center.

- A third center of early English-speaking settlement in America was Philadelphia, situated on the mid-Atlantic coast, between New England and the South. The key population groups here were Quakers and Quaker sympathizers, again immigrating to America for religious reasons. About 23,000 Quakers entered America through the port of Philadelphia between 1675 and 1725.
- They came from all over England but mostly from the North Midlands, so they brought more northerly English dialect forms with them, not the southern British features that were more prominent in New England and the South. They were also a bit lower in social stature than their neighbors to the north, and they were definitely more down to earth than Southern plantation owners. There was also more mixing in the Philadelphia area, as English speakers intermingled with indigenous Americans and with people from Wales, Germany, and Holland.
- Adding to the Northern British influences on the Philadelphia region were settlers from Scotland. And then there were the Scots-Irish—one of the most important population groups in the formation of American English. The Scots-Irish were descended from Scots who had moved to the Ulster colony, in Northern Ireland, in the early 1600s. They retained an archaic dialect that was even more distinctive than today's Scottish English, and they brought their unique brand of English to America.
- About 275,000 Scots-Irish and other colonists from the northern peripheral areas of the British Isles—northern England, Scotland, and Ireland—poured into America through the port of Philadelphia between 1717 and 1775. Many of them traveled westward into interior Pennsylvania and then southward, down the Appalachian Mountains into western Virginia, Kentucky, the Carolinas, and Tennessee. Today's

Appalachian English, the Inland Southern subdialect, derives much of its character from its original Scots-Irish roots.

- Each of the East Coast settlement areas we've addressed so far—Tidewater Virginia, New England, and Philadelphia—can be considered a dialect hub, a focal point for what would become a distinct dialect region. Each was born of founder effects from the prominent groups of original English-speaking settlers and also the influences of language contact.
- Despite their geographic distance, New England and the Tidewater South had a lot more in common with each other than with the Philadelphia dialect hub, the mid-Atlantic, or Midland. This is because they shared common southern English dialect roots. They also shared a common orientation toward England, the English upper crust, and the language of the home country.
- So far, our discussion of the foundation stage has focused mostly on two ingredients in the formation of American English: dialect retention and dialect mixing. There's another key factor—language contact—and there are two more foundational dialect hubs that illustrate the profound effects of language contact on language structure and on dialect vocabulary.
- Charleston, South Carolina, was founded in 1670 and was from the outset a mixture of people from different British English dialect areas and English speakers from different American colonial regions. There were also many different languages, among them Welsh, Dutch, French, and a host of West African languages that came in with the importation of slaves. The languages of black slaves and their descendants, as well as the effects of linguistic contact between different African languages and myriad English dialects, had a profound impact—and not only in Charleston and the American South, but on American English in general and on English across the world.

- In the Charleston area, people of African descent living in the Sea Islands created a creole—a mixed language whose vocabulary typically comes mostly from the group of the language in power—called Gullah, or Geechee, out of English and African heritage languages. Today, Gullah is fading away as its speakers conform more to general American English, or at least general Southern English. But it was its own language, not a variety of English.
- The final colonial dialect hub is New Orleans. It wasn't until 1803 that New Orleans passed into American hands as part of the Louisiana Purchase. When English speakers moved in, they encountered a complex linguistic mix that had been in place, and in flux, for practically a century before they got there. The first European settlers were French, along with some Germans. And soon thereafter, slaves from Africa and the West Indies were brought in. This time, the creole the Africans created had French vocabulary, not English, and it survives today as Louisiana Creole.
- New Orleans has also traditionally been home to a uniquely American brand of French, Cajun French, descended from the French dialect of the Acadians who came to New Orleans from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in Canada in 1765. Today, the impact of the Cajuns on the linguistic landscape of New Orleans is mostly in the form of Cajun English. It's influenced by Cajun French, but it's English, and it's spoken by native English speakers and by people who don't even know French.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *Pronouncing Shakespeare*. (David and Ben Crystal's website on Original Pronunciation: <http://originalpronunciation.com/>.)

Fischer, *Albion's Seed*.

Schneider, *Postcolonial English*.

Wolfram and Schilling, *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do linguists and historians of English know what Shakespeare and his contemporaries sounded like? What sort of evidence would you use to uncover older forms of speech prior to the advent of audio recordings? Try to think of at least three sources of evidence.
2. Prominent sociolinguists William Labov and Peter Trudgill have gradually changed their views on the role of group and personal identity in the progress of language and dialect change. Originally, they believed that identity- and attitude-related factors played a much more important role than the "mechanics" of which languages and dialects come into contact with which other ones and how many speakers of each come into the mix. They have now reversed their position and maintain that mechanical forces are paramount. This is diametrically opposed to Edgar Schneider's view, as presented in this lecture. What do you think? Do you think that identity-related factors are more important in dialect change than precise calculations regarding who has contact with whom? Can you think of any personal experiences with how you changed your language or dialect (temporarily or permanently) that support one side or the other in this debate?

From English in America to American English

Americanisms—words and word usages that came into the English language from America or came to be associated with the American experience or American life—have been around since the earliest days of English exploration and settlement in the New World, during the foundational stage of American English, roughly corresponding to the 17th century. They become increasingly common, and increasingly commented on, during the next two stages in the development of American English, exonormative stabilization and nativization, when Americans gradually shifted their orientation from British language standards to American ones and when American English gradually became different enough from British English to be considered a dialect in its own right.

Exonormative Stabilization

- By the turn of the 19th century, American English on the East Coast had passed through its first two stages of development and was moving toward nativization. But it was only in its first foundational stage in the West. According to Schneider, the first three stages would get compressed as American English moved westward, so the West would eventually catch up with the East. In fact, today, Americans tend to think of the center of the American language as located in the American heartland, in the Midwest or West.
- But long before there was an American standard, there was a protracted period of exonormative stabilization. We sometimes forget that the first English speakers in America weren't Americans. They were British, for more than 150 years, and cultural and linguistic orientations were toward Great Britain. Throughout the 1700s, the wealthier colonists, in New England and the American South, traveled frequently to England for business and pleasure and even lived there for extended periods. And the colonial upper crust sent their sons to England for schooling, so the first generations of American colonial boys essentially grew up as Englishmen, not Americans.

- The English-like manners and speech of colonial Americans was admired by both colonists and English people back home—and so was the increasing uniformity of American speech. The dialect mixing and leveling that began in the foundation stage continued, and there's evidence for an early American English koine, a relatively uniform dialect used for wider communication across large areas.
- During the course of the 1700s, there was a degree of dialect stabilization, or uniformity. But there were also persistent dialect differences. There was also praise for American speech on the one hand and condemnation of particular American dialects.
- New words entered the English language from America—called Americanisms. The colonists borrowed words from Native American languages and from the other early languages in America: Spanish, French, Dutch, West African languages, and so on.
- Americans also innovated new words out of English word stock through word-formation processes like compounding and combining roots, prefixes, and suffixes in new ways. There are also processes related to how words link up to their meanings—to semantics. America's founders also enjoyed making up new words. Benjamin Franklin, for example, invented a host of new words and new word usages to go along with his new inventions.
- Americanisms weren't always very well liked—not like the allegedly “uniform,” “pure” accent of the early Americans. The American colonial period was characterized by an exonormative orientation toward British usages, not American.

The English-like manners and speech of colonial Americans was admired by both colonists and English people back home—and so was the increasing uniformity of American speech.

Nativization

- But despite criticisms, American linguistic creativity continued apace. It gradually gained speed as the 1700s progressed, and then it really took off in the post–Revolutionary War period, ushering American English into its nativization stage. This is when it finally gets to count as its own dialect, not just a new version of British English.
- It's no coincidence that the beginnings of the nativization stage correspond with the dawn of a new nation. Languages and dialects are a key part of people's sense of national, and personal, identity. And when you start feeling like a different people, you start talking like one. This doesn't mean that the citizens of the new country immediately embrace their new dialect; it takes some time to move from an exonormative to endonormative linguistic orientation, usually longer than it takes to shift political orientation. But, still, the new dialect is there.
- The nativization stage is characterized by an unprecedented level of linguistic creativity. New words continue to spring up in American English and often to spread to England and beyond. Again, the sources are borrowings from other languages and inventions.
- When words are borrowed into English, they're sometimes adopted intact, but more often they're adapted in some way. Pronunciations can be altered to make them more English-like. That's why Native American words were altered long ago. There are also lots of adoptions and adaptations from early European languages in America, such as German, French, and Spanish.
- Another very important source of lexical borrowings are the West African languages that came into America with the importation of slaves. Among the many Americanisms that probably have African roots are words for foods like gumbo and okra and words pertaining to cultural practices and social structures.
- Some of the processes through which Americanisms came into the language as American English was nativizing include compounding, derivation, conversion, back-formation, and semantic shift.

- Compounding is the process of making new words by putting together two or more existing words. In early American, we have words like “backwoods,” “underbrush,” “upland,” and “statehouse.”
- Derivation involves combining roots with prefixes and suffixes, so-called affixes, in new ways. This includes now-defunct words, such as “boatable” and “cites” (for female citizen), and words we still use, such as “belittle,” “advocate,” and even “lengthy” instead of “long.”
- Conversion is when words are shifted from one part of speech to another without any change in their form. For whatever reason, people really seem to dislike conversions, especially conversions from noun to verb. For example, people complain about contemporary conversions like “to impact” or “to friend.”
- Back-formation involves shortening words by removing material that seems to be an affix but is really an integral part of the original word. A great example is Thomas Jefferson’s verb “neologize,” a verb he seems to have neologized out of the original noun “neologism.”
- As with borrowings, English-based Americanisms can be created through semantic shift—by narrowing or broadening. An example of semantic broadening is the word “barn.” The word originally was used to refer only to a storage place for grain. Its meaning was broadened in America; American farmers today use barns to store all kinds of things, including animals and farm equipment.
- Another type of semantic shift is metaphorical extension, when word meanings are altered in somewhat more fanciful ways. A few examples involving original English words are “fork” for a divide in a road, “branch” to refer to a tributary of a river or stream, and “blades” for the pointed tips on the tops of corn plants.
- Dialect words and word origins are fascinating, but dialects are more than just words. They also involve distinctive grammatical patterns and pronunciations. So, as American English nativizes, it also develops its

own ways of putting words together into phrases and sentences, as well as its own pronunciations.

English in England

- What was happening to English on the other side of the Atlantic, in England? It's no surprise that American English was innovative; that's a natural result when a language travels from one country to an entirely different land. But, whether or not they're transported to new situations, all languages and all dialects change over time. American English was changing, in many ways, away from British English. But England's English was changing, too, away from American English.
- One very important linguistic development that took place in England over the course of the 1700s was the development and promotion of a standard for English pronunciation: Received Pronunciation (RP). Before this time, there were dialects that were considered better and worse than others. But there wasn't a single, uniform, codified standard that was set down in rule books and actively promoted as proper English usage.
- Language authorities, often self-proclaimed, set down standards in the 1700s that would endure for generations and, to an extent, to this day. Samuel Johnson published his well-known *General Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. It was prescriptive, not simply descriptive. And in it, Johnson set forth how English ought to be used. Another influential work outlining the new English standard was John Walker's *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language*, first published in 1791.
- One of the main features of RP is r-lessness, or non-rhoticity, in words like 'mothuh,' 'fathuh,' 'cah,' and 'yahd.' We tend to think of r-lessness

Dialect words and word origins are fascinating, but dialects are more than just words. They also involve distinctive grammatical patterns and pronunciations.

as a “classic,” quintessential feature of “pure” British English, the enunciation of kings and queens, of William Shakespeare. But Shakespeare and his contemporaries didn’t actually talk that way. They pronounced their r’s—more like today’s Americans in everyday life than British Shakespearean actors on the stage and screen.



Shakespeare and his contemporaries talked more like today’s Americans in everyday life than British Shakespearean actors on the stage and screen.

- When r-dropping came into fashion in England in the latter half of the 1700s, much of America, quite frankly, was left behind. Only posh Bostonians and Southern landowners could keep pace. So, general American English is r-pronouncing, but traditionally Boston and the Tidewater South were not. Today, r-lessness has receded sharply in the South. You still hear it a lot in stereotypes of Southern speech and in actors' portrayals, but it's not an accurate depiction anymore.
- New York City was also a long-standing r-less area. Boston is really the last holdout of r-lessness in the United States, and there are indications that it's now fading even from there. This is in sharp contrast to British English, where r-dropping is still going strong. In fact, it's still spreading from its original center in the London area, outward to increasingly peripheral areas of the British Isles.
- Other features of RP that set it apart from American English, even as long ago as the Revolutionary War days, include so-called broad-a patterns, as in 'path' for 'paeth,' and new stress patterns on words like 'satisfact'ry' and 'laborat'ry.' And these don't just sound affected; they actually are. They were purposely put on, in the latter half of the 18th century, as part of a linguistic style that would sound new and different—a new linguistic fashion.
- One more ingredient in the linguistic distancing that characterized the nativization period in the development of American English is linguistic conservatism. Americans were pretty innovative from the get-go. But with colonialism often comes provincialism. And when you separate yourself from long-standing cultural centers like London, your language can take on a bit of a provincial character as well. Pronouncing our r's is a retention, not an innovation. And American English has also held on to older lexical items like "fall" for "autumn" and relic grammatical usages like "have gotten" for "have got."

Suggested Reading

Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms*.

Mencken, *The American Language*.

Questions to Consider

1. Of all the levels of dialect patterning, why are people so fascinated with words? Why do words seem to be so much more tied to our identities, and our emotions, than dialect pronunciations or grammatical structures? Can you think of some words that people from other dialects use that you think are just “wrong”?
2. According to linguist Edgar Schneider, when a language moves into a new location, borrowings from indigenous languages tend to occur in a certain order. The first borrowings are toponyms—words for places and geographical features. Next are words for local flora and fauna, and finally, words for indigenous peoples, cultural practices, and artifacts are borrowed. Why do you think borrowing typically proceeds in this fashion? In the development of American English, there are actually much more Native American place names in the Midwest and West than in the 13 original colonies, where we find many British-derived names, such as New York and New England. Why do you think this is the case?

The Rise of American Language Standards

Americans remained oriented toward British English standards throughout the 1700s and well into the 1800s. And even today, we still have a lingering sense of exonormative orientation toward proper British English. We don't try to use British English, but when we hear a proper British accent, we might still think of the speaker as "better" than us—more educated, more cultured, or at least more linguistically adept. The stages in the development of new dialects aren't always strictly chronological, and they can overlap. But, as you'll learn in this lecture, there was a tipping point.

American Dictionaries

- During the course of the 19th century, Americans turned away from a primarily outward-looking linguistic orientation and began looking inward. They began establishing language standards of their own, setting them down in writing (in dictionaries and grammars), teaching them in schools, and celebrating them in American literature. So, in the 1800s, American English entered into the stage of endonormative stabilization.
- And there were instigators. Some of America's founders were enthusiastic linguistic innovators. In addition to Thomas Jefferson's lexical inventions, such as "belittle" and "neologize," Benjamin Franklin invented new words to go along with his many new inventions and proposed a radical spelling reform—a new, phonetically based alphabet to replace the English alphabet. John Adams, the second president of the United States, proposed an academy to establish an American standard language.
- But it was not a president, statesman, or scientist who really turned American language attitudes around. It was a dictionary maker, a lexicographer, named Noah Webster. Webster was a political activist, a firm believer in the separation of the United States from England and in the separation of the two languages.

- In 1806, he published his first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. But then, he immediately set about compiling another one that would become far more important: *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1828. This dictionary codified and helped legitimize American language standards through its inclusion of uniquely American vocabulary, usages, and spellings.
- Webster is often thought of as a big innovator himself, but he actually did a lot more to establish new usages than to invent them. He was an early proponent of spelling reform, and he did introduce some simplified spellings. Some of these never quite took, but others were captured in his American dictionary, alongside other new spellings that were already commonplace in America, just not yet officially sanctioned.
- In terms of vocabulary, Webster is credited with a lot of new words, but he insisted that he only invented one: “demoralizing,” which appeared in a 1794 political pamphlet, where he wrote, “All wars have, if I may use a new but emphatic word, a demoralizing tendency.”
- Webster was an educational reformer as well as a lexicographer. And maybe even more influential than his dictionary was his *American Spelling Book*, first published as part of a larger textbook in 1783, then later published on its own. Thanks to its cover design, the book became widely known as “the blue-backed speller,” and it was so widely used in schools, offices, and homes that it became a best seller.
- In the endonormative stabilization stage, American English is set down in writing. It’s codified. And with codification comes the spread of literacy and the spread of adherence to standards—to uniformity, or at least the ideal of uniformity.
- Early American English was uniform to an extent. There was dialect mixing and leveling in the American mid-Atlantic and Midland, beginning with the founding of Philadelphia in 1682. And there was probably also another period of leveling, with the opening of the West in the early decades of the 1800s.

- But there have always been dialect differences in American English. There were regional differences along the East Coast, a distinctive New England dialect, and of course Southern American English. And the 1800s would also see the rise of a very important ethnicity-based dialect: African American English. And there were long-standing differences based on social class and education. Wealthy Bostonians and Southerners emulated British Received Pronunciation well into the 19th century and beyond. But the rest of America moved in different directions.
- In a way, Noah Webster was a champion of dialect variation. He promoted the new American English dialect, not British English. But he did uphold the ideal of a single American standard. On one hand, we can see the spread of a single language standard as an American endeavor, a democratic effort. Just about everyone had access to the blue-backed speller, so in theory, just about anyone could learn to spell and read. On the other hand, the emphasis on standards actually led the so-called land of the free into a long-standing period of what we might call linguistic policing that still persists today.
- Webster himself fell victim to linguistic policing. His textbook was criticized for its American rather than British orientation. And even Americans who upheld American standards began to turn against fellow Americans who didn't live up to their ideals.
- As English speakers began moving westward, the Midwestern speechways that were developing were condemned. This is an interesting turn of language attitudes. In the 1700s, New England speech was disparaged, but 100-plus years later, it was being pointed to as somehow more "pure." That goes to show you yet again: What counts as "good English" is linguistically arbitrary.
- America's rising concern for using "proper" English was to pass into higher education. In the late 1800s, Harvard examiners begin giving a test in which applicants were asked to correct a dozen "specimens of bad English" in 30 minutes. And beyond the realm of education, the concern for good English would lead to the establishment of literacy tests for U.S. citizenship and, in the Southern states, for voting.

American Literature

- But despite all the language policing, all the condemnations of “bad” English, in the endonormative stabilization stage, American English, at least in certain forms, was for the most part positively rather than negatively portrayed. And American English in its varied forms was further codified, and actively celebrated, in literature.
- The rise of a distinctly American literature began in the early 1800s. Among the first literary figures in this new tradition were Washington Irving, known for “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” among other works, and James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote *The Last of the Mohicans*. These are works with American settings like Sleepy Hollow, New York, and American themes like the effects of English settlement on Native Americans.
- But it’s been argued that, in some ways, Irving and Cooper are perhaps more exonormative than endonormative in their linguistic orientation. It’s been said of Irving that he wrote “of and for England, rather than his own country.” He was a proponent of British “genteel” values and language. And James Fenimore Cooper felt that no one could rival the best speakers in Britain. America might have declared its political independence from England in 1776, but its linguistic independence was more gradually achieved, during the course of the 1800s and beyond.
- Helping to achieve this independence were a number of literary figures that truly were more American than British, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, and Mark Twain. Most of these writers knew each other, influenced each other, and praised and criticized each other.
- Many were tied to the transcendentalist spiritualist and philosophical movement of the 1820s and 1830s. The movement was based on tenets of self-reliance and independence and a belief in the inherent

The rise of a distinctly American literature began in the early 1800s.

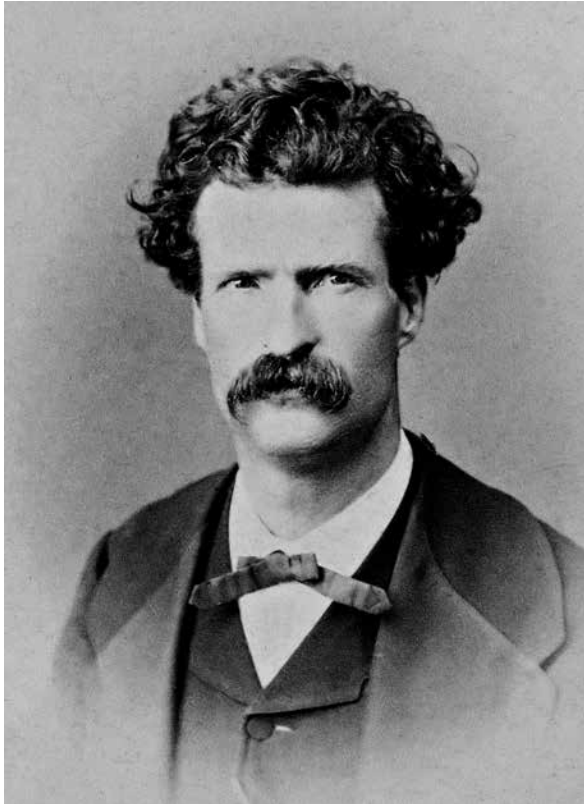


American author Washington Irving (1783–1859)

goodness of nature and people. It was society—societal institutions like politics and organized religion—that was corrupting. The emphasis of the transcendentalists on freedom and on the individual represent the essence of the early American spirit—and so do their writings.

- The leader of the transcendentalist movement was Ralph Waldo Emerson. He became well known as an essayist, lecturer, and poet. One of his most important essays is “The American Scholar,” from around 1837. In this work, Emerson urged American scholars to believe in and express their individuality and to break from the old world and old ways of thinking.
- Emerson had a big influence on American thought in general and on the thoughts and writings of his literary friends and protégés who moved in transcendentalist circles. In particular, he had a very direct influence on one of America’s greatest poets of the 1800s, and possibly of all time, Walt Whitman. Whitman is a hugely influential voice in American literature. He can be said to embody American literature and America itself.
- In addition to celebrating individuality and their new democracy, a number of the early American literary greats also spoke out against its problems. One of these issues was slavery. Henry David Thoreau, of Walden Pond fame, was an outspoken proponent of abolition. He’s also known for his essay on “Civil Disobedience,” in which he argues that individuals are duty-bound to speak out against their government, to disobey it when it’s responsible for or sanctions injustices.
- Another influential literary figure in the abolitionist movement was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who is well known for her portrayal of the evils of slavery in her 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The book sold 300,000 copies in its first year and spurred many people to take up the abolitionist cause.
- America’s early literary figures weren’t afraid to speak out against the ills of American society. And American literature wasn’t confined to intellectual circles. It played an important role in politics, too.

- American literature in its formative decades had American settings and American themes, and it wrestled with American issues, including slavery, Americans' treatment of Native Americans, and the cruelty of some of the early New England Puritans.
- American literature also included American language. The master of using American dialect in American literature is Mark Twain, who is often regarded as the first genuinely American writer, although of course there were strong precedents. He's indisputably one of the greatest American writers of all time.
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in the later 1800s, is often called the Great American Novel. Twain is well known for his use of Americanisms, American ways of speaking, and American dialects in his writings.
- Mark Twain had a good bit to say about American English. He readily recognized that by his day, American English had become so different from British English that they were separate languages. He had a good ear for the linguistic details that differentiated the two "languages."



American writer Mark Twain (1835–1910)

- In terms of different ways of speaking within America, Twain also noticed that the English of well-educated people in New England more closely followed British norms than English in other parts of America. So, for many, it was more positively valued.
- But not for Twain. He wasn't a language policeman. He wasn't a prescriptivist. He was a descriptivist, and a man of the people.

Suggested Reading

Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*.

Webster, *The Original Blue Back Speller*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think there's a place for dialect variation in American schools? Does grammar need to be standardized? What about pronunciations? And how do you feel about insisting that schoolchildren adhere to (American) English spellings when some (many?) of these spellings don't really make much sense? Given the fact that dialects like Southern American English, African American English, and New York City English are rule-governed, complex language systems like any other, why do children need to learn "standard" English—if they do?
2. Linguists who study the historical development of dialects must often turn to written sources for evidence of older lexical, phonological, and grammatical forms. What challenges do different types of written sources present? Consider such sources as official documents (e.g., transcripts of the Salem witchcraft trials), travelers' records (e.g., Captain John Smith's accounts of his voyages to Virginia), personal letters (e.g., from Irish immigrants in America to family back home), and literary works (e.g., Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*). What special challenges would you face in attempting to reconstruct the history of a historically disparaged dialect like African American English?

Where Is General American English?

Where is standard American English spoken? There's no single codified standard for American English, so maybe a better term is "general American English"—the type of English we think of when we think of newscasters or important public officials. So, where is general American English? Where did it come from, and when did it arise? As we examine these questions, we need to explore the development of American English as it moved from the East Coast into the Midland and West.

The First Theory of the Rise of General American English

- During the period of westward expansion, the 1800s, Americans were developing and adopting American language standards—not so much British anymore. But just what *was* the standard, general language variety that people were aspiring toward? There are at least three theories for where and when general American English arose.
- The first theory is that general American English is New England English—Yankee English. New England had been a coherent dialect area since the earliest foundations of English in America, and it spread westward in a remarkably coherent way, especially the western New England subdialect. Eastern New England was still a bit more eastwardly oriented, toward the sea and toward interactions with England.
- The Yankee settlements of New England were successful, and they were well regarded, especially, some would argue, by the Yankees themselves.
- The Yankee population was mostly urban and relatively wealthy, and its people were industrious and well organized into coherent communities, many centering on churches. They were eager to move westward, to take over new territory. And when they moved, they tended to move entire congregations, and sometimes even entire towns.

- The Yankees established schools and colleges as they moved into the Midwest and West. And they took pride in their language norms. They regarded their dialect as “pure” English, retained intact since the days of the first Puritan settlers.
- Of course, it actually wasn’t. Eastern New England had changed along with British English. They adopted the Received Pronunciations that came into vogue in the late 1700s, including the r-less pronunciations that still typify Boston speech. In western New England, people retained their r’s and other pre-RP pronunciations, but their dialect had been changing in other ways. So, it wasn’t Shakespearean English either.
- All the ingredients were in place for the widespread promulgation of northeastern speechways westward across the northern United States and the promotion of the New England dialect as standard or general American English. Yankee speech was held in high regard, and its spread was supported by strong communities and by a very positive attitude toward Yankee culture more generally.
- In fact, the New Englanders who pushed westward in the 1800s tended to hold themselves above other regional and cultural groups. They were ethnocentric, and they were elitists. They had an attitude that would later be called “Yankee cultural imperialism.” According to linguist Timothy C. Frazer, this attitude went hand in hand with Yankee linguistic imperialism.
- But as New Englanders were moving westward, so were southerners. And there were tensions between the two groups. New Englanders looked down on southerners. They saw them as uneducated and indolent.

All the ingredients were in place for the widespread promulgation of northeastern speechways westward across the northern United States and the promotion of the New England dialect as standard or general American English.

- Perhaps in part due to a sense of entitlement, and certainly due to hard work and perseverance, northeastern speech, especially that of western New England, spread westward across the northern United States, all the way to the Pacific Northwest. To this day, the Pacific Northwest is a relatively coherent dialect area, even though much of the West is more dialectally mixed.
- The New England dialect and its component features spread west across the northern United States in a fairly coherent manner, along with cohesive communities and a sense of cultural and linguistic “correctness.” So, maybe “correct” American English comes from Yankee English. Maybe we can trace its roots all the way back to the Puritan settlements of the early 1600s—or maybe not.

The Second Theory

- The second theory for where general American English comes from is that it was born of the early dialect mix in Philadelphia, the mid-Atlantic, and points westward—the U.S. Midland dialect area.
- The mid-Atlantic area was a mix of dialects from northerly areas of the British Isles—northern England, Scotland, Ireland, and Scots-Irish from Northern Ireland. Added to the mix were Continental European languages like German and Dutch as well as the Celtic languages of the British Isles—Gaelic (sometimes called Scots Gaelic), Irish, and Welsh.
- Even more mixing took place as people from the middle states moved westward, as they were joined by people from the U.S. North and South. In some places, these three concurrent streams of settlement resulted in a three-tiered dialect pattern, not only across but even within Midwestern states.
- For example, some dialect maps clearly show a North, Midland, and South in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In these states, there are dialect lines, especially between the North and South, or at least the South and everything else.



- Sometimes the straight lines are interrupted by unexpected pockets of Southern speech in more northerly areas and more Northern speech in more southerly areas. Despite these pockets of relatively homogeneous speech, most of the Midland is mixed, and the mixing just keeps intensifying as English moves ever westward during the course of the 1800s.
- Dialect contact often leads to the leveling out of dialect differences, to the creation of a somewhat simplified language variety that can be widely used and widely understood, a so-called koine. And what better candidate for a national standard, for general American English, than just such a vehicle of wider communication? So, maybe general American English comes from a Midland koine.

The Third Theory

- There's a third theory, probably with the most traction, that holds that general American English *does* come from a koine. But not the colonial

Midland koine—a newer koine, one that arose after 1800, in the interior United States.

- In his detailed discussion of the stages of development of new English dialects, linguist Edgar Schneider proposes that American English was characterized by two periods of koine formation—koineization—each with its own distinct character.
- After all, America is a big country, and English was well established on the East Coast, well into its third stage of development, endonormative stabilization, by the time it entered its first foundational stages in the West. So, it's possible that there was an early colonial koine, and then a later koine, born of intensified dialect mixing as English moved into the Midland and from there into the West.
- According to Schneider, the first “general American English” might actually have been Southern in character. Rarely do we find early travelers to the colonies writing about Southern American English specifically, but only about New England.
- While Englishers once were disparaging of what would later become the “imperious” Yankee dialect, in contrast, the English of the early South mostly escaped notice, maybe because back then it was the “neutral” variety, something of the general American English dialect of its day.
- The post-1800s dialect mix most likely originated in the North—which is not to say that that general American English is Yankee English, but only that Yankee English might have been one of its ingredients. Sociolinguists agree that dialect mixing and leveling did take place in upper New York State.
- The area was populated by speakers from different New England dialect areas, including Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and western Connecticut. And the Erie Canal brought in many other people, including both native English speakers from elsewhere in the United States and nonnative speakers.

- The dialect and language contact that characterized upper New York State in the early 1800s could have readily led to dialect mixing, language contact, and the dialect simplification and leveling that go along with them.
- The mixed, leveled dialect of western New England and points immediately westward could have been the basis for a koine that spread from its area of origin into the northern Midwest and from there throughout the West. And this could very well be the basis for today's general American English—not New England Yankee speech per se, but a New England–area mixed dialect, simplified, leveled, and readily adoptable by many people across a wide area.

General American English Today

- Where is general American English located today? If we think it's Midwestern, we need to think again. The language of a large part of the Midwest, centered on the Great Lakes area, has been changing rather dramatically over the course of the past few decades, and it no longer sounds very "general" at all.
- So, if general American English is a regional dialect, it's either moved westward, away from the Midwest, or its geographic area has been curtailed, to exclude the Great Lakes region. And it's certainly not an East Coast dialect—not New England, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, or the South. These dialects are all too distinctive.
- So, maybe general American English isn't located anywhere. Maybe it's a-regional, having more to do with social class and education than with region. Maybe general American English has more to do with what it's *not* than with what it actually *is*. Maybe it's speech, or writing, that's considered "dialect-free," free of any pronunciation features allowing us to pinpoint a speaker's regional origins and most definitely free of stigmatized grammatical features like "ain't" or double negatives.

- Or maybe general American English is more of an ideal than a reality. Maybe it's the way Americans wish they could talk, or think they should talk, and just never quite achieve. Americans are very concerned with using "correct" English. And just because American English established a strong presence in the United States as the 19th century progressed, as American English reached the West Coast, this doesn't mean that Americans have always been very confident in the way they use language.
- When did Americans finally gain linguistic confidence? When did they turn away from British English language standards toward American norms?
- When did Americans finally gain linguistic confidence? When did they turn away from British English language standards toward American norms? The answer is surprisingly gradually and surprisingly late.
 - Throughout the 1800s, as they were moving westward, Americans were moving toward their own language standards. Such figures as Ben Franklin, Noah Webster, and Mark Twain had an influence on establishing and promoting American language standards.
 - But it would take more than a century after the publication of Webster's *Dictionary*, in 1828, for British linguistic influence to really fall away. In fact, the American English pronunciation norm for upper class, educated speech; for formal, public speech; and for broadcast speech and movies was quite British-sounding until after World War II.
 - The first step toward achieving genuine linguistic confidence in your nation's own dialect—in achieving an endonormative rather than exonormative orientation—is pride. As Americans became proud to be Americans, through the course of the 19th century and into the 20th, they eventually became proud to speak American English.

Suggested Reading

Metcalf, *Presidential Voices*.

Murray and Simon, eds., *Language Variation and Change in the American Midland*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of when you think of general American English? Is it a regional dialect? A social class dialect? A situational dialect? Does anyone really speak it, or is it an ideal? What are some linguistic features you associate with general American English, if any?
2. What factors might have contributed to the increasing acceptance of r-pronunciation in the United States as the 19th and 20th centuries progressed and to the decreasing acceptability of r-less pronunciations? Consider both attitudinal and demographic factors. When did the shift from r-lessness to r-pronunciation take place? You might think of Hollywood movies from different decades as you consider this question.

Mapping American Dialects

It's possible to tell a lot about where people are from based on the words they use, their pronunciations, and their grammatical patterns—from their dialect. Often sociolinguists, dialectologists, and dialect geographers create dialect maps by starting with a dialect survey. Building from items they know or suspect will show variation, they design and administer questionnaires. Results are compiled and plotted on maps, and then dialect lines can be drawn. They can then take what they've learned about the regional distribution of dialect features to pinpoint, or at least get a sense of, where a particular person is from, based on their answers.

Features of Dialect Surveys

- The Harvard Dialect Survey is a comprehensive survey of U.S. regional dialect variation conducted in 2003 by linguists Bert Vaux and Scott Golder. The quiz and accompanying heat maps of the regional distribution of various dialect features come from Joshua Katz, a statistician and expert in graphic visualizations.
- The Harvard Survey has now morphed into the Cambridge Online Survey of World Englishes, and it includes maps for all three types of dialect features: lexical items, pronunciation variations, and grammatical features.
- The Harvard Dialect Survey maps represent just a handful of the countless maps of U.S. dialects and dialect features compiled by sociolinguists and dialect geographers over the decades. The various maps have a lot in common, but they do have their differences. But why are they different, if they're all mapping dialects across the same geographic space?
- Different dialect geographic projects focus on different types of linguistic features. Dialects are composed of pronunciation features, grammatical constructions, and lexical items. One highly authoritative source for dialect maps that focuses on phonological features is *The*

Atlas of North American English, by sociolinguists William Labov, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg. You can find an overview map of North American dialects online by going to the home page for the Atlas, clicking on “The Dialects of North America,” and then on “North American English Dialects.” The map shows the major U.S. dialect areas: the South, North, and Midland in the Eastern half of the country and a very large West in the other half.

- A good source for maps showing the regional distribution of various grammatical features is the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project, led by linguists Jim Wood and Raffaella Zanuttini. If you go to the project website and click on “Phenomena,” you can generate maps by clicking on the various grammatical constructions listed.
- The ultimate source for dialect words is the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*, which is a fascinating compilation of American English words and phrases that show regional or social variation. It’s a compendious six-volume set that took decades to put together.
- There are lots of maps to go with the lexical entries, but they look pretty different from other dialect maps—not just because they’re focused on lexical items rather than pronunciation or grammar, but because *DARE* doesn’t use regular U.S. maps. It uses its own maps, in which the states are resized based on their population density.
- If you’d like to see what a *DARE* map looks like, go to the website for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, click on “Maps,” and start exploring. You can check out the regional distributions of a number of interesting lexical items.
- The different dialect maps also differ in terms of how the data were gathered. Survey questionnaires are quite common, whether administered on the Internet, by phone, in person, or even by mail. Some surveys involve multiple choice questions. Others are more open ended, and respondents are given questions but not possible answers. Or they might get fill-in-the-blanks.

- In general, a problem with dialect surveys is not knowing whether what people say they do with language is what they actually do. Maybe they avoid claiming features they think might be “wrong,” like grammatical features such as “y’all” for plural “you.” Or maybe they say they do use features when they really don’t.
- Another issue is that there might be more than one “right” answer, but you’re only allowed to pick one. Maybe you use two terms interchangeably, or one word in one situation and another in a different context, maybe to indicate a different meaning. Or maybe, once you start thinking about it, you’re no longer sure which word you use.
- And then there’s the problem of dialect pronunciations. These can be pretty difficult to depict, or decipher, using regular orthography rather than phonetic symbols.

Gathering Data

- But, these issues aside, survey questionnaires are a very useful tool for dialect geographers. They can give them a lot of data on many dialect features over a wide area in a relatively short time. They might be a bit artificial, but if you go around listening for particular dialect features in “real life” interactions, you may or may not hear them anyway.
- Sociolinguists also use informal interviews—basically recorded conversations—as a compromise between just listening in and sitting people down and going through lists of survey questions. But conversational data is more useful for pronunciation features than lexical items, because it’s not likely that all the words you’re interested in would just happen to come up. Pronunciations aren’t a problem: No matter what someone’s talking about, he or she is going to use a full range of vowels and consonants.
- *The Atlas of North American English* used phone interviews supplemented with a few fill-in-the-blanks and direct questions asking people whether they do or do not use particular features, so-called self-report questions.

- The *Dictionary of American Regional English* also used interviews as one of its data sources. It also relied on written records of dialect usages, gathered by the dictionary-making team and sent in to the *DARE* offices by scholars and other interested parties. A third source of data was observations on dialect usages by members of the American Dialect Society, the organization that initiated the *DARE* project.

Depicting the Distribution of Features and Dialect Areas

- Traditional dialect maps show lines around dialect areas, just like lines around states and other political boundaries or lines indicating rivers and coastlines. These boundaries are determined by charting survey responses and drawing lines between the use of one feature and the use of another.
- Sociolinguists call these dividing lines isoglosses. When isoglosses for a number of dialect features come together to form a bundle of isoglosses, we draw a thicker line, a dialect dividing line, and soon we can separate our map into dialect areas.
- But things aren't always that clear-cut. Often, transitions between one dialect feature and another are more gradual than abrupt, and there are transition zones between dialect areas. In these zones, we find alternations between linguistic variants. Different people might use different variants, and even a single individual might sometimes use one variant and sometimes another.
- Drawing dialect lines is also complicated by the fact that dialects are not composed solely of unique features—features found only in one dialect and no other. Instead, they mix and match features. What makes each dialect unique is the distinctive constellation of features it comprises, not a long list of features it keeps just to itself.

Traditional dialect maps show lines around dialect areas, just like lines around states and other political boundaries or lines indicating rivers and coastlines.

- How do we capture the mixing and matching on a dialect map? One way to avoid oversimplifying is to plot each individual survey respondent's usages for each feature as a point. This is what the Harvard, Cambridge, and Yale dialect surveys do. The points can then be used to generate a map for each dialect feature of interest.
- We can also depict variant usages as heat maps, where each variant of a particular feature is represented by a different color and probability or proportionality of usage in a given geographic area is represented by degree of shading, with darker areas indicating heavier usage and lighter areas indicating lighter usage.
- We can also start overlaying, or layering, our feature maps. When we do this, we'll begin to see that, despite all the mixing and matching, different areas will have different features in common, so dialect regions will emerge. Using this layering technique, areas with the highest concentrations of regionally specific dialect features are called primary dialect areas, those with few features are secondary areas, and we can go down from there, to tertiary and even quaternary areas.

Dialect Perceptions

- There's no single ideal way for mapping regional dialect variation, just as there's no single ideal method for gathering the data behind the dialect lines—or points, or layered visualizations. You might find that if you take a dialect quiz more than once, you get different results each time. This doesn't mean that the quiz is flawed; it means that dialect boundaries are fuzzy, and individuals are individuals. We all have different influences impinging on our dialects, and that includes a lot more than just region. There's also social status, ethnicity, gender, age, and even personality.
- And there are situational and attitudinal effects, too. People taking dialect surveys might not claim features they think are stigmatized, and they might try to avoid these features in real life, too, even if they're a natural part of their home dialect. Conversely, Americans can feel pretty positive about dialect differences.

- For decades, sociolinguists have been studying, and mapping, not only how people use dialects, but also how they feel about them. A pioneer in the field of mapping dialect perceptions is sociolinguist Dennis Preston. Preston and his colleagues have created and conducted numerous studies designed to get at how people from different parts of the United States perceive dialect differences on several dimensions.
- There's a good bit of variation in how nonlinguists draw dialect maps, depending on where they're from, among other factors. There's also regional variability in terms of dialect attitudes.
- These differences aside, studies have found that the various adjectives people use to evaluate regional dialects can almost always be collapsed into two dimensions: correctness and pleasantness,

People can put their dialect identification abilities to good use by helping pinpoint the regional origins of a person making an anonymous threatening phone call.



often called status and affect. And in many cases, positive ratings on the affect scale are inversely correlated with positive ratings on the status scale. So, the same dialects that we think of as more pleasant than other dialects are also the ones we think of as least rather than most correct.

- Linguists know that there's nothing linguistically better or worse about one dialect versus another one, so what are nonlinguists rating when they evaluate different dialects so differently? Language attitudes are attitudes about *people*, and we carry over the same perceptions and misperceptions, the same stereotypes and prejudices, from *people* to people's linguistic usages.
- And not only do we judge how people are by their linguistic usages, we also judge who they are. Sociolinguists conduct studies in which they ask nonlinguists to identify people's regional origins, ethnicity, sexuality, and other aspects of identity based on dialect alone, or even isolated features of dialect or voice. Often, results are quite accurate.
- People can put their dialect identification abilities to good use. For example, they might use them to help pinpoint the regional origins of a person making an anonymous threatening phone call. Or they can put their linguistic talents to not-so-good use. Sociolinguist John Baugh has found that dialect identification unfortunately can go hand in hand with dialect prejudice.
- Dialect discrimination might still be able to hide behind the guise of regard for "proper English," but armed with an accurate view of the nature of regional, social, and ethnicity-based dialect variation—and of people's dialect perceptions—we can begin to root out dialect prejudice. And mapping helps sociolinguists investigate these issues and more.

Suggested Reading

Cassidy and Hall, gen. eds., *Dictionary of American Regional English*. (*Dictionary of American Regional English* website: <http://dare.wisc.edu/>)

Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*.

Schilling, *Sociolinguistic Fieldwork*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think that dialect maps based on different kinds of dialect features (lexical, phonological, grammatical) might look different from one another? Why might certain types of features show different patterns of regional distribution than others?
2. Traditional dialect geographic projects are usually based on surveys conducted with mostly nonmobile, older, rural males in various geographic regions. *The Atlas of North American English*, published in 2006, is based on a very different type of sample—younger urban people, including at least one female from each urban area surveyed. What sort of picture of dialect variation can we glean from each type of population sample? Keep in mind that it has been shown that women are quicker to adopt linguistic innovations than men. You can also think about why this might be the case.

Ethnicity and American English

America has always been a land of immigrants, and American English has been shaped since its earliest days by contact among immigrants from all over the British Isles and from around the world. Early English-speaking settlers in America came into contact with Native Americans and their hundreds of languages. Spanish speakers were already established in the New World, and then came speakers of German, French, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and Scots-Irish—the list goes on and on.

Immigrant Groups in the United States

- The Scots-Irish were descendants of Scots who had emigrated to Ulster in the north of Ireland at the beginning of the 17th century, when Scottish English was even more different from England's English than it is today. The old ways of speaking were preserved in Ulster and transported to America—in bulk.
- From their initial settlement hub in Philadelphia, the Scots-Irish quickly spread westward, first into Pennsylvania Dutch farming country in western Pennsylvania and then to the hills. As early as the 1730s, they began moving south down the Shenandoah Valley into western Virginia, the Carolinas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. As many as 250,000 Scots-Irish had migrated to America by 1776—one in seven of all American colonists at the time.
- The Scots-Irish left an enduring mark on the American South. They brought iconic elements, such as the log cabin and the hammered dulcimer, borrowed from the Germans they encountered in Pennsylvania. And they brought their speechways.
- Once the colonies broke from England, immigrants—including Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, and Scandinavian people—began pouring into the new nation, with its promise of new beginnings.

- The different immigrant groups who came to the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries tended to settle in different regions. Immigrants from Continental Europe moved into more northerly areas of the United States—New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and points west. There were some important German settlements in the South, including in Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and the San Antonio-Houston area.
- But by and large, the South was populated by people of English, Scottish, Irish, and Scots-Irish descent and by descendants of the early Spanish and French colonists, as well as the West African slaves who had been forcibly brought to America since the earliest days of British colonization.
- As the myriad immigrant groups mixed and mingled with one another, and with English speakers already established in the United States, they contributed to the character of American English and American English dialects. In many cases, they also retained distinct cultural identities. These cultures are often linked to heritage languages—Italian, German, Spanish, Yiddish, and so on. Over time, they’ve also come to be associated with unique varieties of American English.

Cultural Dialects

- So, dialects aren’t just regional ways of using language. There are cultural dialects, too. And cultural and regional variation intersect. They’re overlaid. We can picture this by thinking beyond a two-dimensional dialect map of the United States to a three-dimensional view that includes culturally based variation within geographic areas.
- When we think about a culture and its ways of using language, sometimes we’re thinking about political dividing lines, or nationality—American, British, German, Spanish. But often, we’re thinking about a far more complicated notion: ethnicity.
- But how do we define ethnicity? What does it mean to be a member of a particular ethnic group? And what’s the relationship between language and ethnicity? These are very complex questions, and the following are three important points about them.

- There's a difference between “ethnicity” and “race.” Traditionally, the concept of race refers to biological factors—physical and genetic traits. Ethnicity is related to shared bloodlines and common ancestry. But it also encompasses cultural traditions, values, belief systems, worldviews, and practices—including language.
- Often, these concepts are so inextricably intertwined that we can't define one without the other. We can't necessarily single out members of an ethnic group and then look at how that group uses language, because a key element in how ethnic group membership is defined in the first place could very well be how a person uses language.
- Ethnicity-based linguistic usages have nothing to do with genetics. There's a long and unfortunate history of “essentializing” social groups that are different from one's own—that is, ascribing particular traits, usually negative ones, to an entire group and then chalking these up to “essential,” or biological, factors. And linguistic traits have not been spared this fate.
- Biology-based views of language difference were once quite pervasive, and some people still hold them. But this idea is completely unfounded. There's no biological basis for any ethnic dialect or any ethnic or national language.
- All languages and dialects are linguistically equal. Dialects are not derivative forms of “real” languages. Instead, all varieties of a language are dialects, including those considered by society to be “proper” or “standard.” And all dialects are fully formed, rule-governed, logical linguistic systems.

- Regional dialects considered to be nonstandard sometimes still carry positive connotations and can be important expressions of cultural, community, and individual identity. For example, the same people who think of the English of the American South as “uneducated” or “slow” might at the same time like how friendly and warm it sounds.
- Unfortunately, though, dialects based on dimensions other than region—such as social class or ethnicity—don’t fare so well. Americans often judge ethnic dialects much more harshly. This is because judgments of dialects come from judgments of the people who speak them, and, sadly, Americans historically have tended to judge people of nonwhite ethnic backgrounds quite negatively. Today, there’s arguably less overt racism than there used to be, but dialect discrimination persists.
- Even people who pride themselves on their supposed knowledge of language rules might denounce African American English as “broken” or “incorrect,” but this dialect is just as regularly patterned and rule-governed as any other.

Jewish American English

- Jewish American English arose during the waves of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the early and mid-1800s, most Jewish immigrants to the United States were Ashkenazi Jews from Germany. Beginning in the 1880s, there were huge influxes of Jews from Eastern Europe—Russia, Poland, and Romania.
- Many of the Jewish immigrants of the 1800s spoke the languages of their countries of origin, and many spoke Yiddish, a language combining older elements of German with influences from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic languages.
- The use of Yiddish in the United States has since declined, but it’s left a lasting impact on the English of people of Jewish descent and on American English in general. Jewish American English has also been shaped by direct influence from Hebrew, both ancient and modern.

- The most distinctive component of Jewish American English is its rich lexicon, or vocabulary. It's influenced by all of these languages and includes words widely known and used throughout America. It also includes terms that are mostly confined to populations of Jews. Many of the lexical items have to do with religious beliefs and practices, such as "bat mitzvah." Non-Jews might know these words, but they rarely use them.
- Other Jewish English lexical items have become more widely known and used. Among these are terms for foods ("challah") and dietary practices ("kosher") as well as terms for activities ("schmooze") and characteristics ("chutzpah").
- Jewish English is also characterized by so-called transfer features. These are grammatical or pronunciation features incorporated into a nonnative language based on the occurrence of similar features in the native language. Again, some of these are more confined to Jewish communities, while others are more widespread.
- When words and structures come into English from other languages, often they're not simply transferred but transformed as well—in terms of form and meaning and in terms of who uses them. In terms of the transformation or adaptation of linguistic form, when words are borrowed into English, they often take on English-like pronunciations. Jewish American English is characterized by loanwords, transfer features, and linguistic transformations that took place when the languages of Jewish immigrants came into contact with American English.
- In some ways, Jewish English stands out as pretty distinctive; in other ways, its impact on general American English has been so great that we don't always notice when we're using Jewish English words and structures. The intertwining of Jewish English and other dialects is especially intricate in New York City, which has had a very high concentration of Jews throughout most of its history.

- Ethnic dialects aren't really as neatly separable from regional dialects as our three-dimensional dialect map might suggest. In reality, the interplay between ethnic and regional variation is more of an interweaving than an overlay. Different types of language variation are always intertwined; no one is just an ethnicity or regionality.
- When we talk about any dialect—regional, ethnic, class-based, gender-based, etc.—we have to remember that dialect groups are composed of individuals and of subgroups of various types.
- When we talk about any dialect—regional, ethnic, class-based, gender-based, etc.—we have to remember that dialect groups are composed of individuals and of subgroups of various types. There's a lot of variation within any social or cultural group, so there's variation both across and within ethnic dialects: intra-ethnic language variation.
- Not all Jews in the United States use all features of Jewish American English all of the time, and some features of Jewish English are used by non-Jews. The interrelation between ethnicity and language use is more than a matter of simple correlation.

Lumbee Native American English

- Over the centuries, American immigrants have always been flexible, adapting their languages, their cultures, and themselves to the new conditions around them. At the same time, they've shaped the American condition culturally, socially, and linguistically. Heritage languages have morphed into ethnicity-based dialects of English. Or, taking a more nuanced view, they've enriched the linguistic repertoires of descendants of immigrant groups and of Americans in general.

- But it's not just immigrants to America who have shown linguistic adaptability. Indigenous Americans have also shown linguistic flexibility, alongside a remarkable degree of cultural resilience.
- The Lumbee Indians, located in the Robeson County area of southeastern North Carolina, are the largest Native American tribe east of the Mississippi. Lumbee English has its origins in the earliest days of English settlement, when indigenous Americans first encountered the English language.
- Like other immigrant groups, the Lumbee have always considered themselves to be a unique people with a strong sense of cultural identity. But there's an important linguistic difference. Unlike the Jews, Italians, or Germans, whose heritage languages still color the English of their descendants generations later, the Lumbee have no vestige left of their ancestral language.
- But this is not to say that the Lumbee are not linguistically unique. Over the centuries, they have forged a unique ethnolinguistic repertoire from existing linguistic materials, creating a distinctive dialect of American English.
- The Lumbee live in a tri-ethnic area, alongside neighboring whites and African Americans, each with a distinct Southern-based dialect of their own. The Lumbee have borrowed dialect features from each group, and they've transformed them along the way—in form, meaning, and usage patterns.
- What's most unique about their dialect is the distinctive combination of features it comprises, both unique and shared. The Lumbee have crafted a unique repertoire out of the English dialects around them. And why have they done this? Because of their strong sense of unique ethnic identity. Their heritage language was taken from them long ago, but that hasn't stopped them from asserting themselves through dialect.

Suggested Reading

Benor, *Becoming Frum*.

Wolfram, Dannenberg, Knick, and Oxendine, *Fine in the World*.

Questions to Consider

1. In thinking about ethnicity-based language variation, another topic to consider is how various ethnic groups are talked about, including what kinds of labels they're given. Consider this: Over the course of its history, African American English has been labeled as Negro Dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Vernacular Black English, Afro-American English, Ebonics, African American (Vernacular) English, and African American Language. Native Americans have been referred to as American Indians, Native Americans, and Indigenous Americans, among other labels. Why do ethnic labels change over time, and who changes them? And how important is it to be referred to as an indigenous person versus an American Indian? Do certain labels carry connotations that others don't? Consider also that in the course of their long history, the Lumbee have been classified as both "white" and "colored."
2. In this lecture, we've discussed the impact of several specific non-English languages on the development of various ethnicity-based American dialects and on American English in general. At any given point in America's history, there has been a large presence of nonnative speakers of English side by side with native speakers. What kinds of effects might the prevalence of second-language English have on native English varieties in the United States? Think about your own experiences in learning a nonnative language as you consider this question.

African American English

No matter what you call it—Ebonics or African American English, language or dialect—African American English is a legitimate language variety. Like all dialects, it has correct and incorrect expressions, is consistent, and has rules. Sociolinguists have been studying them for decades. In fact, African American English is by far the most studied variety of any language in the world. It's intricately patterned, richly expressive, and a crucial part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of African Americans, the United States, and the world.

African American English: What It Is and Is Not

- Just what *is* African American English? Given the profound misunderstandings surrounding this language variety, it's important that we're first clear on what it *isn't*.
- First, African American English is not slang. American English gets a lot of its slang terms, historical and current, from African American English, but slang is not the same thing as a full-fledged way of using language.
- Slang has to do mostly with the lexical level of language—with words, particularly informal ones with special in-group meanings. Slang terms are most often used by young people, and they're mostly short-lived, though not all of them. Usually, slang changes with the times and with the groups who use it. It's a kind of social-lexical phenomenon.
- But African American English is much, much more than that. Its lexicon is distinctive and vast, comprising words for every possible occasion. Also, it's not just a matter of words. African American English also has distinctive pronunciation and grammatical features, as well as conversational styles, rhetorical and oratory styles, and literary genres. It's been around for generations; it's certainly not a short-lived lexical fad.
- Another thing African American English is not is hip-hop. Hip-hop language gets a lot of its features from African American English, but

hip-hop language is at once both broader and narrower than African American English.

- It's broader in the sense that it's the language of the hip-hop culture, the hip-hop nation. This extends beyond ethnic and national boundaries to people around the globe, mostly young people, at least so far.
- And hip-hop language is narrower than African American English in the sense that African American culture comprises subcultures other than hip-hop, and African Americans use language varieties other than hip-hop language. Hip-hop culture and hip-hop language are associated with rapping, disc jockeying, break dancing, and graffiti art—with street culture. African American English is associated with African American culture in a much broader and more deeply historical sense.
- Finally, what African American English is not is “broken English” or “bad grammar.” There are rules for African American English, just like there are for “standard” English.
- African American English is a language variety—a full-fledged, rule-governed, intricately patterned linguistic system with distinctive features at all levels of language—lexical, phonological, grammatical, conversational, and beyond. It's been around for generations and is widespread among people of historic African descent in the United States, of all ages and across geographic dialect regions.
- In a linguistic sense, it doesn't matter whether we call African American English a language or a dialect. But in social and political senses, it can matter a lot. There's public controversy over what to call African American English. And there's a lot of discussion among sociolinguists, too. Labels have changed over time, and they continue to vary.
- Sociolinguists tend to shy away from the term “Ebonics.” Originally, the term was simply a blend of the words “ebony” and “phonics,” coined by African American social psychologist Robert Williams in the 1970s. The terms “African American Language” and “African American English” are

more common among sociolinguists. You'll also hear the label "African American Vernacular English."

- Sociolinguists have so far mostly studied more vernacular varieties of African American English. But there are standard, formal, yet still uniquely African American ways of using language. So it's useful to be able to make a terminological distinction between African American English, broadly, and a narrowly defined African American Vernacular English.
- Of course, the term "vernacular" can have negative associations, too. But not to linguists, who use the term to refer to a legitimate language variety that's different from the socially accepted standard, or to refer to a person's first-acquired native dialect or language.
- Sociolinguists also sometimes make a distinction between African American English and African American Language. The former is focused on vocabulary, pronunciations, and sentence structures. The latter also encompasses ways of structuring conversations, delivering speeches and sermons, and producing and performing poetry, prose, and music lyrics.

African American English and Other American English Dialects

- Just how different is African American English from other varieties of American English? Some African Americans use a dialect that sounds pretty distinctive, but others don't. And even individuals can sound quite different depending on whom they're talking to and why.
- Even the more vernacular varieties of African American English share some features with other vernacular American dialects, especially those of the American South.
- While there are similarities between African American Vernacular English and other dialects, there are also differences. Some features historically were shared but have

Just how different is African American English from other varieties of American English?

since diverged. Some are found to a greater or lesser extent across dialects, and others are unique to African American Vernacular English. There are also features that originated in African American Vernacular English but have now spread into general American English, including many lexical items—both slang terms, such as “cool” and “hip,” and enduring vocabulary, such as “tote” and “cola.”

- But a simple inventory of lexical items, pronunciation features, and grammatical structures doesn’t really capture the full uniqueness of African American Vernacular English—or any dialect, for that matter. Dialects are composed of features, but features form systems. And like any other dialect, African American Vernacular English is highly systematic. In fact, in some ways—such as in verb tense and subject-verb agreement—it’s more intricately patterned than so-called standard American English.

The Historical Origins of African American English

- How did African American English develop its unique character? Its historical origins and development have long been controversial topics in linguistic circles. There isn’t much evidence for what its formative stages would have been like. Slavery, repression, segregation, and devaluation silenced a lot of voices in early America. But there are four theories on the development of African American English: the Creolist, Anglicist, Neo-Anglicist, and Substrate positions.
- The Creolist view holds that African American English began life as a creole, which is a type of language, not the name of a particular language. Creole languages arise from contact between two or more different languages, usually in situations of unequal power. But they’re not simple mixes of the various languages.
- Usually, the vocabulary of a creole comes mostly from the powerful language in the mix, called the superstrate language. But the grammar is something different. When languages are brought into sudden contact, and people need to quickly figure out how to communicate with each other, the linguistic structures of the different languages get reduced to their simplest forms.

- When language contact is sustained, the grammar begins to grow more complex again, and the result is essentially a new grammatical system. It's different from the grammatical systems of any of the original contact languages, but it's a full-fledged system. It can now be used in a full range of situations, not just for basic business purposes, and children acquire it as their first language and further solidify its unconscious rules.
- According to the Creolist view, the radical language contact situation between slaves and masters in early America led to the formation of a creole language. Not only were incoming slaves confronted with English, but they also had to figure out how to communicate with one another, because they brought many different West African languages with them. The new creole language had an essentially English vocabulary, but the grammar was far from English-like. Over time, the grammar of African American English became a lot more like English, but some creole elements remain to this day.
- The Anglicist view holds that African American English was formed just like any other American English dialect—from a mix of different English dialects. Today's African American Vernacular English is distinctive because it preserves some British dialect features that were lost in other American English dialects. Some vernacular forms of African American English also preserve older English pronunciations.
- The Neo-Anglicist position grew out of the Anglicist view. It holds that African American Vernacular English retains linguistic usages that set it apart. But it's also added distinctions that make it even more different from other dialects of American English than it used to be. And it's added them quite recently, too.
- According to the Substrate hypothesis, African American English was heavily influenced by dialects of British origin during the course of its development. At the same time, it's always been influenced by a substrate, by underlying linguistic features that stem from the West African languages in the original linguistic mix. The substrate may or may not have been associated with a full-fledged creole language. Given the sparse evidence that we have, it's just not possible to know.

- Sociolinguists agree that the unique historical position of people of African descent in the United States led to the formation of a unique dialect. Both language and dialect contact played key roles in its development. Persistent segregation helped sustain its unique character—and so did people’s strong positive sense of African American cultural identity. It’s no coincidence that some of the most distinctive features of African American English arose or were heightened during the civil rights movement and in the following decades.

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Differentiation within African American English

- As with any other large language variety, there are also important differences within African American English, both in terms of its linguistic features and the people who use them. No one’s linguistic usages are shaped by ethnicity alone. Every component of our demographic make-up impacts how we use language – region, social class, gender, age, and so on.
- There are regional differences in African American English, sometimes even from one city to the next. For example, African Americans from Philadelphia are far more r-pronouncing than African Americans in New York City. In Saint Louis and Washington, DC, African American English speakers say ‘hurr’ for “hear,” ‘curr’ for “care,” and ‘curry’ for “carry.” And in the San Francisco Bay Area, a noticeable regional feature of African American Vernacular English is the pronunciation of “man” as ‘mane.’
- Other differences within African American English relate to socioeconomic status or class orientation. As with any dialect, working-class people use language differently than people in middle- and upper-class groups. The features of African American Vernacular English are most concentrated in the working classes, including stigmatized “nonstandard” features.

- It's important to recognize that the stigma has nothing to do with the dialect itself. African American Vernacular English is intricate; it's even richer in meaning in some ways than standard American English. The stigma attached to African American Vernacular English comes from the historic negative evaluation of the people it's associated with.
- Another important dimension of variation within African American English is interpersonal and intrapersonal variation. African American English is at once a highly stigmatized and a highly valued component of cultural identity, so African Americans of all walks of life have learned to be adept at shifting between African American English and general American English, a process called code-switching.

Suggested Reading

Labov, "Unendangered Dialects: Endangered People."

Rickford, *African American Vernacular English*.

Rickford and Rickford, *Spoken Soul*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think prominent African Americans spoke out against the Ebonics resolution in 1996? Do you or members of your family or home community use language features or a language variety that you don't like? Think of some specific linguistic features you wish you didn't use in light of our ongoing discussion of the linguistic systematicity of all language varieties.
2. Have attitudes toward African American English changed in the decades since the Ebonics controversy? What would it take to promote more positive feelings—and more accurate information—about dialects that are considered to be nonstandard?

Mobility, Media, and Contemporary English

In the 20th and 21st centuries, language has been flowing through different channels of communication—and so have people. Historically, there were three major patterns of population movement that shaped American English: from East to West, from South to North, and from rural areas to America's cities. The 20th and early 21st centuries have seen changes in two of these. African Americans reversed their earlier mass migration out of the South into more northerly areas, and many Americans (mostly white) moved from city centers into more suburban areas. But now, people are going back to the city once again, with the rise of gentrification. How have these changing channels of communication impacted American English?

Population Movements

- In 1910, about 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South, and about 75 percent of these lived in small communities of less than 2,500 people. Just 60 years later, in 1970, nearly half of all African Americans lived outside of the South, with 77 percent of them in cities. So, there was a radical movement from South to North and from rural to urban.
- When sociolinguists first started studying African American Vernacular English in the 1960s, they studied it in the context of Northern cities. They concluded that African American Vernacular English and white vernacular varieties of American English were very different. Only later would they come to realize that African American Vernacular English actually has a good bit in common with Southern white dialects.
- Lately, African Americans have been moving from the North back to the South, to Southern cities such as Atlanta, Houston, and Memphis. And even when they don't relocate, they tend to be more mobile. There's more travel from the North to the South, for events like family reunions and church homecomings, and there's travel from Southern rural areas to cities, for cultural events and family visits.

- When people from different regions intermingle, the result is dialect mixing—and, often, the leveling out of regional differences into a more widespread, uniform language variety. So, the 20th century saw the rise of a pan-regional vernacular norm for African American English, especially in terms of grammar. Some of the widely used grammatical features of African American Vernacular English features are long-standing forms retained across the centuries, but others are newer.
- This doesn't mean that there's no regional variation left in African American Vernacular English. There are still differences between Northern and Southern varieties and across different Northern cities. African Americans who migrated to East Coast cities following the Civil War and the two World Wars came mostly from the coastal South. Those who moved into Midwestern cities came mostly from the Deep South. And along with these different streams of migration came different dialect features.
- White Americans have also been moving from North to South in recent decades. Businesses are moving southward to favorable economic climates, and individuals follow, for jobs and warmer weather. Sometimes the linguistic effect of this new pattern of southward movement is dialect leveling, but sometimes it's just the opposite.
- Both whites and blacks have been moving from North to South, and African Americans have been migrating from rural to urban areas. European Americans initially moved in the same direction, from the rural United States into urban centers, or straight from Europe into large American cities. As people from different backgrounds came together to share geographic space, their languages and dialects gradually lost their geographic associations

When people from different regions intermingle, the result is dialect mixing—and, often, the leveling out of regional differences into a more widespread, uniform language variety.

and took on connotations of ethnic group membership rather than national origin per se.

- But the parallel movement patterns began to diverge after World War II. European Americans stopped moving into cities and began moving out of cities into suburbs. They were lured by cheaper housing and bigger properties.
- They were also moving away from African Americans, fueled by racial prejudices that have persisted since the first slaves were brought to America from West Africa. This “white flight” from cities to suburbs led to population segregation and to the increasing linguistic differentiation of African American English from white dialects.
- Since the latter years of the 20th century, upper- and middle-class people, usually white, have been returning to the cities from which they once fled. They’re transforming lower-income urban areas into posh neighborhoods. They’re gentrifying.
- The revitalization of lower-income neighborhoods can be a good thing. It brings diverse people together and brings in new businesses and services. But it also brings rising property values, and longtime residents can be displaced, or at least marginalized. So, gentrification can stir up lots of social and economic tensions, and it can bring resistance. And sometimes when people don’t have the economic resources or population numbers to fight back against encroaching forces, they muster linguistic defenses.
- The movement of populations from suburbia back to the city has its linguistic effects, just like movements from South to the North, and back again, and from the country to the city. All of these movements have impacted American dialects across the country.

The Movement and Spread of Information

- People often presume that the media are a powerful force in language change. They also tend to believe that the continued proliferation and

diversification of mediated communication will inevitably flatten out dialect differences, and maybe even language differences.

- Interestingly, sociolinguists have long maintained that the media don't have much impact on language change. We might pick up a few scattered words or phrases from television and social network sites, but when it comes to deeper changes—alterations in phonological or grammatical systems—sociolinguists have maintained that we need face-to-face interaction. Superficial, passive exposure to news anchors and movie stars just isn't enough.
- In recent years, sociolinguists have begun calling their received wisdom into question. They've begun testing their claim about the noninfluence of media on language. After all, there are a lot more media outlets than there used to be, and a lot of them are pretty interactive.
- There are a few ways we can go about studying media effects on the spread of language change. Some researchers have investigated the dissemination of linguistic innovations with a wide, even global, reach, because these are likely candidates for possible spread via media.
- All languages and dialects are constantly changing, and some changes are so natural that they can spring up independently in locations far removed from one another without media influence. It's also possible that a particular change was poised and ready to happen, and then it was helped along by media influence.
- Sociolinguist Peter Trudgill has always been skeptical of media influence on language change, but he does maintain that the media can have what he calls a "softening up" effect. Media can help accelerate the pace of changes that are already incipient.
- In order to really get at the possible effects of media influence on the spread of a particular language change, we need to study how people use the feature in everyday life and how the feature is used in the media. We also need to consider other possible channels of influence

and reasons for change. Ideally, we also need to study whether, and to what extent, people actually interact with various media sources.

- Sociolinguists are only now beginning to undertake such comprehensive studies, but their findings so far are fascinating. The leading researcher in this regard is Jane Stuart-Smith. She and her research team have found that people's exposure to linguistic features in television shows does not seem to correlate with their use of the features in everyday life. Instead, what really matters is whether or not people engage with the television shows: Do they like them? Do they care what happens to the characters? Do they become emotionally involved?
- Beyond this, it also matters how much engagement people have with the social groups and social practices in their immediate surroundings. When people adopt language features, they adapt them. They use them to suit their local social purposes. We don't pick up television usages because we want to sound like people on television. We adopt them because the features have become meaningful for us personally and for our friends in day-to-day, face-to-face interaction.
- So, in the long run, the enduring sociolinguistic premise that the media really don't have much effect on language change is actually right in a way. The media do have an impact, but only when we let them. We're not just passive recipients. We decide what media we'll consume—to an extent, anyway. And we decide what impacts they will have on us, linguistic and otherwise.
- Communications researchers agree. Nonexperts tend to assume that we take in and repeat the behaviors we see, hear, and read about in the media that surround us—for example, that violent movies lead to violent behavior. But it's just not true. We have a lot more say than we give ourselves credit for. And our local sociocultural surroundings are still our most important influence, even in this age of increasing globalization.

The Spread of Linguistic Norms

- What is the role of the media in the spread of linguistic norms, in the leveling out of dialect differences and even language differences—especially social media, because it's so much more interactive than traditional broadcast media?
- There are some surprising answers to this question, too. Computational linguist Jacob Eisenstein has conducted some very interesting research on social media and dialect variation. He studied the tweets (Twitter messages) of 2.77 million users across the United States—114 million messages—to see whether there's any regional variation or if it's all just one big Internet dialect.
- He discovered that people actually do use regional dialect words in social media. They also use regional grammatical structures and spellings that reflect dialect pronunciations. Some of these show the same regional distribution as in speech.
- So, regional variation can persist in cyberspace, and features originating in regional spoken varieties can be incorporated into the language of the Internet. It's not all standard English, not all general American. But it is English.
- There's no doubt that the prevalence of English on the Internet has impacted countries far beyond the United States, including countries whose primary native language is something other than English. And even when they aren't responsible for the spread of particular linguistic usages, the Internet and other media can spread language attitudes, values, and styles.
- According to sociolinguist Tore Kristiansen, the media spread the idea, often subconsciously, that modern linguistic forms are better than conservative ones and that informal language is better than formal. Kristiansen also maintains that the media promote language styles that connote self-assurance and excitement, often over values like intelligence and trustworthiness, attributes we associate with conventional standard or formal language.

- A very prominent sociolinguist, Nikolas Coupland, points out that when it comes to media and language, probably the biggest influence is that our communication has simply become much more mediated—much more reliant on an array of technologies and practices that were simply unimaginable in 1607 Jamestown, or even 1970s New York City.
- It's not so much that the media have a big impact on linguistic systems or structures. They have a slight impact on lexical items, but not much impact on grammar or pronunciation. They might help accelerate the spread of big global languages like English, but there are undoubtedly many other forces at work, too—economic, cultural, political, and so on.

Research has shown that people use regional dialect words in social media. They also use regional grammatical structures and spellings that reflect dialect pronunciations. Some of these show the same regional distribution as in speech.



- Where the media really affect language is in their profound impact on communication practices. The media really are indelibly shaping American language behaviors and language attitudes, even though American English, and American regional and social dialects, aren't going anywhere anytime soon.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *Txtng*.

Modan, *Turf Wars*.

Questions to Consider

1. What effects, if any, do social media have on your language use? As you consider this, think beyond specific linguistic features like acronyms, abbreviations, and punctuation, and think about how the opening up of different communication channels might have changed the way you communicate with the various people in your life in various situations. Is it acceptable to break up with a romantic partner on Facebook, or to share major family news in a text? Do you use the same types of media with people of different age groups?
2. Another factor that can affect traditional dialects is tourism. What do you think the linguistic effects of tourism in “quaint” little mountain towns or island communities might be? What about in Washington, DC? Can you think of places where dialect features are “for sale” alongside other souvenirs? As you consider this question, remember that the result of dialect contact is not always dialect leveling.

The History of American Language Policy

The United States has never had an official language, and it doesn't have one today. But maybe it's time we changed that. It seems like we've never had so many non-English-speaking immigrants in the United States. Don't we have to do something to protect the English language in America? The truth is that we don't have to fear linguistic diversity. In fact, we should protect and promote it. That's the best way to ensure that America will continue to thrive in our complex world with its myriad peoples.

Linguistic Tolerance

- America has always been a nation of immigrants. English itself is an immigrant language. There were hundreds of indigenous American languages in what would later become the United States, and they were there for centuries before the first English speakers arrived in the late 1500s.
- And English wasn't the first European language in what is now the United States. Spanish predates English by far. Spanish explorers first arrived in what is now Florida in 1513. They established their first permanent colony, San Agustín, in 1565. The Spanish also moved into the West and Southwest quite early on. In fact, when Americans won their independence from England in 1783, Spain still laid claim to about half the territory of today's continental United States.
- French was also prominent in the colonial era, especially in the Louisiana Territory. Napoleon reclaimed the territory for France in 1800 and then sold it to the United States in 1803.
- Dutch was the main language of New Amsterdam. When it passed into English hands in 1664 and became New York, it was already home to 18 nonindigenous languages.
- Germans and their descendants have long been one of the biggest population groups in the colonies and in the United States. At the time

of the first U.S. Census in 1790, 8.7 percent of the population of the new nation was German. And their numbers kept increasing. There were important pockets of German settlement in the mid-Atlantic, especially Pennsylvania. In fact, German was the official language of what was once the colony of New Sweden, in present-day Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. German influence would later extend throughout the United States, especially to Midwestern states.

- For the most part, the plurality of languages in the early United States was tolerated. America's founders didn't establish an official language, and it didn't seem to matter. English became the *de facto* language of the new nation, and allowances were made for other languages where necessary.

Indigenous American Languages

- At first, and continuing through most of the 1800s, there was general acceptance of languages other than English in the United States. And this didn't hurt English at all. The English language spread throughout the United States as the country expanded westward. A number of other European languages came in, too, but they weren't really seen as a threat, at least not at first.
- One notable exception to the general air of linguistic tolerance was indigenous American languages. As Americans moved westward, Native American peoples and languages suffered devastating casualties. Europeans had been at war with Native Americans since the earliest exploratory and colonial days.
- When America gained independence and began pushing westward, they forced Native Americans westward, too. Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 uprooted tens of thousands of Native Americans from their homes across a vast area in the southeastern U.S. The displacement affected a number of tribes, and the displaced peoples were forced to walk more than 1,000 miles westward to the Oklahoma territory. Thousands died along the Trail of Tears—of exposure, disease, hunger, and exhaustion. And the displacement, violence, and death continued as whites moved ever westward.

- As European occupation and expansion spread throughout the Americas, the continent's indigenous languages and cultures were decimated. Hundreds of Native American languages were killed—and not just individual languages, but entire language families.
- America has always been a nation of immigrants. English itself is an immigrant language. There were hundreds of indigenous American languages in what would later become the United States.
- Today, fewer than 200 Native American languages are spoken in North America. Of these, most are endangered, spoken by only a handful of older individuals. Fewer than 35 are actively spoken by both adults and children.
 - There were also deliberate policies aimed at linguistic eradication. In ironic recognition of the importance of language to cultural identity, the U.S. government made quite purposeful efforts to stamp out Indian languages as a means of stamping out Indian tribal identities.
 - A number of Indian boarding schools were established throughout the United States, beginning in 1879. Indian children were taken from their homelands and tribes and brought to these centralized schools, put together with children from other tribes with different customs and different languages. They were taught American ways, and they were taught in English. They were forbidden to speak their native languages; in fact, they were shamed and punished for doing so.
 - A Congressional Subcommittee on Indian Education was convened nearly a century after the boarding schools were first implemented, and it was still contending with the disastrous effects of the earlier educational policies against Native American languages and peoples.

Anti-Immigration Sentiment

- As policies against indigenous languages were implemented in the late 1800s, tolerance began to wane for other non-English languages in the United States, too. School instruction in immigrant languages began to be curtailed or even outlawed. Anti-Catholic sentiment led to the suppression of German, even though many German speakers weren't even Catholic. Then, World War I came along and really pushed German out of America's schools and American public life.
- Another key factor in the so-called Americanization campaign of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is the sheer number of speakers of languages other than English. Immigration from Europe reached its first peak in the decades between 1890 and 1919.
- Many of these were so-called new immigrants—Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Slavs—not the Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians that Americans were already used to. And these new immigrants were accused, even by a federal commission, of not learning English as quickly as the old immigrants.
- There was a backlash against the influx of immigration. A quota system was enacted in 1924, and it would remain in place until 1965. Under this system, immigration was limited to two percent of each immigrant group already in the country as of the 1890 national census. The numbers decreased, and so did the diversity of America's immigrant groups.
- Also, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the first laws requiring literacy for immigration, citizenship, and voting were passed. And the voting laws affected not only new immigrants, but also people who had been in the United States a long time—the descendants of slaves of African descent in the U.S. South.
- Finally, after decades of accommodation to continental European languages, cries for official English began to be heard at the government level. The state of Nebraska declared English its official language in 1920. Just after this, in 1923, the first federal attempt

at language legislation was introduced. This was a bill to declare American the official language.

- This was a somewhat jocular anti-British statement, not necessarily an anti-immigrant one. The proposed language was “American,” not English per se. But still, the sentiments behind it were pro-English. The state of Illinois actually did adopt American as its official language; it wasn’t changed to English until 1969.
- Anti-immigration sentiment in the United States ran high during the first half of the 20th century in the wake of two World Wars. English speakers became fearful not only of German, but also of the East Asian languages that were becoming more and more prevalent on the U.S. West Coast. So, America became increasingly English-speaking in the 20th century, at least on the surface—in public spaces, the classroom, the workplace, the courtroom, and the government.

Legislation for American Linguistic Diversity

- In the mid-20th century, immigrant numbers were at an all-time low. The percentage of foreign-born residents in the United States went from 14.7 percent in 1910 to 4.7 percent in 1970. Still, there was no official English at the federal level. English had a stronghold anyway, without any specific legislation to promote it. In fact, despite all the anti-immigrant sentiment, there were several important pieces of legislation designed to protect other languages in the United States.
- One of the most important rulings on language rights in U.S. history was handed down in 1923, in *Meyer v. Nebraska*. In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the state’s prohibition against teaching non-English languages (in this case, German) in its schools was unconstitutional. The due process and equal protections afforded by the Fourteenth Amendment forbade it.
- The next important piece of legislation for American linguistic diversity was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This included Title VI, a law that “prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin

in programs and activities receiving Federal financial assistance”—which includes federally funded schools.

- The Civil Rights Act was tested in another landmark case, *Lau v. Nichols*, in 1974. This time, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that providing English-only instruction to non-English-speaking public school students in San Francisco was a violation of Title VI.
- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act affirms linguistic rights in the workplace. It mandates that employers cannot discriminate on the basis of race or national origin. This includes discrimination on the basis of language of national origin.
- Around the same time that the Civil Rights Act was passed, the quota system for American immigration was lifted. Now immigrants could come in on the basis of family unity and based on job skills. So, the doors were opened once again, and the United States began a new period of linguistic and cultural diversification.
- As immigrants came in, linguistic tolerance decreased. The 1980s saw a huge upsurge in the number of U.S. states declaring English as their official language. Today, there are 31. A few of these states also recognize the language rights of others.
- The 1980s also saw the first serious attempts to make English the official language at the federal level. In 1981, California Republican Senator S. I. Hayakawa, founder of the U.S. English movement, introduced a constitutional amendment that would prohibit making any federal law requiring the use of any language other than English.
- Congress never voted on this, but legislative efforts to make English the official language of the United

We humans care deeply about our languages.

This goes to the heart of why communities and nations often feel the need to enact laws and policies to “protect” them.

States continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and into the 21st century. The proposals tend to be attached to immigration reform bills, so that makes things complicated. And it's no coincidence that concerns about too much non-English in America go hand in hand with concerns about immigration.

- We can imagine other reasons why a country might want to promote a single language. Countries have argued that having a single national language promotes national unity. And sometimes this argument seems right, but it doesn't seem like a unitary language is strictly necessary to promote national unity in a country.
- And even when countries do have official languages, they're never really monolingual. The vast majority of the world's population speaks more than one language, and linguistically homogenous nations are very much the exception, not the rule.
- We humans care deeply about our languages. This goes to the heart of why communities and nations often feel the need to enact laws and policies to "protect" them. Languages play a key role in people's sense of group and personal identity.



Suggested Reading

Crawford, *At War with Diversity*.

Harrison, *The Last Speakers*.

Questions to Consider

1. What reasons besides promoting national unity could be given in favor of declaring English the official language of the United States? What does having an “official language” actually mean? Does it mean that using other languages would be outlawed, or that government communications would be distributed only in English? What problems with “official English” do you foresee?
2. What factors might lead to the death of a language other than the death of its speakers? Are there forces at work that come from within endangered language communities as well as external pressures?

Latino Language and Dialects in America

In the United States, the population of people of Latin American heritage has soared over the past few decades, and there now seems to be more Spanish than ever before in America. You can hear Spanish all around you, and you can see it on signs in stores, for example. This very visible and audible presence of Spanish might make us think that native Spanish speakers who come to America will stop learning English and that their children will also grow up monolingual in Spanish. Maybe native English speakers will have to start learning Spanish to keep up.

The Three-Generational Pattern of Language Shift

- The history of America is a history of immigration. And throughout the course of American history, English has never been in danger—never before, anyway. Immigrants may have started out speaking non-English languages, but they and their descendants very quickly shifted to English.
- This happened with the earliest immigrants from Continental Europe, such as the Germans, the Irish, and the Scandinavians. It happened with the so-called new immigrants of the early 20th century: Southern and Eastern Europeans. And, of course, it happened with the speakers of other languages who were already in North America when English speakers first got there—speakers of Native American languages as well as Spanish.
- When people from a particular country immigrate to a new country, where a new language is prominent, the linguistic result is almost always what we call a three-generational pattern of language shift. In the overwhelming majority of cases, when a family comes to a new country, the immigrant generation, the first generation, will speak only or mostly the old language.
- Their children, the second generation, will be bilingual, though they may already be dominant in the majority language—English, in the case

of the United States. By the third generation, the children are mostly monolingual in English. They might be able to understand the heritage language, and they might use it to a limited extent in certain arenas, maybe music or religion. But mostly English predominates.

- But does the three-generation pattern hold for people of Latin American heritage in the United States today? Most immigrants today are from Mexico, by a large margin. And there are four more Latin American countries in the top 10: El Salvador, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala.
- All together, the Latino American foreign-born population of the United States totals 15.7 million. When you add in people of Latin American descent who were born in the United States, the population is 54 million. That's a lot of people whose heritage language is Spanish.
- Surely that must be enough for Spanish to hold its own—and maybe even spread—across the United States, and across the generations. Surely Latino Americans must be bucking the traditional linguistic trend for immigrant groups in the United States. Actually, they're not.
- Consider some statistics from the Pew Research Center that are based on the latest U.S. Census figures and estimates and on the Pew Hispanic Center's recent National Survey of Latinos. The figures are for adults over 18.
- The percentage of first-generation Latinos, immigrants from Latin America, who report speaking English "very well" or "pretty well" is 38 percent. For the second generation, it leaps up to 92 percent. And by the third and higher generation, the figure is 96 percent. The figures for reading ability in English are basically the same.
- As English ability increases, Spanish fades: 91 percent of adult first-generation Latino Americans report speaking Spanish very well or pretty well, and the figure drops to 82 percent for the second generation. By the third generation, only 47 percent of people of Latin

American heritage report speaking Spanish very well or pretty well. And even fewer can read it—only 41 percent.

Heritage Language Loss

- Linguists who have studied language maintenance and loss in detail have pointed out that numbers alone don't necessarily tell the whole story. The extent of language shift also depends on where the heritage language is used and with whom—the so-called domain of language use.
- Typically, when a heritage language recedes, it's lost first in public, official spheres, such as school and the workplace and in interactions with government officials. It's maintained longer in more private spaces—for example, at home and in church.
- As long as the heritage language is maintained in the home and is spoken to new generations of speakers, it can be retained, even among fairly small numbers of speakers. But once it ceases to be passed down to children—once so-called intergenerational transmission fails to occur—then the language is in trouble.
- And that's the story with Spanish in the United States. It's still spoken in the home, but it's slowly receding. In 2000, 78 percent of Latinos age 5 and older reported speaking Spanish in the home; in 2013, it was down to 73 percent.
- And even when Spanish is spoken in the home, it goes hand in hand with English: 41 percent of Latinos age 5 and older who report speaking Spanish in the home also report that they speak English very well, and 26 percent report speaking English to some degree.
- So, Spanish is fading from the home sphere. Latino children now

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speak English, including foreign-born children. In 1980, 43 percent of foreign-born Latino children spoke English in the home or spoke English “very well”; that figure skyrocketed to 70 percent in 2013.

- Spanish is also fading from other spheres—from leisure activities, where we might expect it to hang on. Forty-nine percent of first-generation adult Latinos report listening to music mostly in Spanish; in the second generation, this falls to 18 percent, and in the third generation, this falls to only 10 percent. In the third generation, by far the majority of Latinos listen to music mostly in English: 74 percent. The same basic trend holds for watching television and television news.
- Finally, 65 percent of first-generation adult Latinos report that they think mostly in Spanish. Only 18 percent of second-generation Latinos report the same. Among the third and higher generations, only 13 percent report thinking mostly in Spanish, while 80 percent report that they think mostly in English.
- Like other immigrant groups before them, Latino Americans are experiencing the classic three-generational pattern of language shift: heritage language loss. And all this despite continuing population increases and what seems to be an increasing sense among Latinos that retaining Spanish would be a good thing to do. Ninety-five percent of adult Latinos report that it’s either very important or somewhat important that future generations of Latinos in the United States speak Spanish.
- That’s what they’d like, but that’s just not happening. Latinos recognize the cultural value of their heritage language. But they also know that English has the practical value in the United States, that English is what’s important when it comes to succeeding—economically, culturally, and personally. So, no matter how much they still value Spanish, they’re not passing it down to their children.
- So, despite the seeming preponderance of Spanish in the United States, despite concerns for the safety of American English in the face

of Spanish, there's actually no cause for alarm. If anything, it's U.S. Spanish that's in trouble, not U.S. English.

- In some ways, this might seem okay. If you come to America, it's not a bad idea for you to learn English, right? But in another way, the loss of Spanish among Latinos in the United States is just like the loss of any other heritage language. You lose a part of your culture, and of yourself, when you lose a language.
- But there are ways of holding onto your linguistic and cultural heritage even as your ancestral language fades away. Descendants of non-English-speaking immigrant groups in the United States can, and often do, develop distinctive dialects of English. And these dialects can at least partly take the place of the heritage languages that are lost. And they can come to serve as important markers of cultural and ethnic identity.
- Since the latter half of the 20th century, as waves of immigrants from Latin America have poured in, we've seen the rise of a number of varieties of Latino English. For example, there's Miami English in Florida, Puerto Rican English in New York City, and Chicano English in the Southwest. More recent Latino English varieties have also been arising in other big cities, such as Chicago, and in the U.S. Southeast.

Misconceptions about Latino English

- There are some misconceptions about Latino English. First, many people think that speakers of Latino English are first-language speakers of Spanish, which introduces mistakes into their English. In reality, Latino English is a full-fledged dialect of English—not learner English. It's a variety of English spoken by native speakers. Its speakers might also know Spanish, but they might not. They might sometimes sound like they have a Spanish accent, but that's because some of their pronunciation features did actually originate in learner English—but in their grandparents' or parents' day, not their own.
- Second, people sometimes equate Latino English with what's sometimes known as “Spanglish.” But Spanglish isn't an English dialect. It's a way of speaking that involves switching between Spanish and

English, called code-switching. This involves more than just using a Spanish word or two here and there. It involves a more complex interweaving of words, phrases, and grammatical structures, even in the course of a single sentence. People often look down on code-switching, but it actually takes a lot of skill in both languages. And just like Latino English, it can be a marker of cultural identity. But remember, Latino English requires only native English language skill.

Forty-nine percent of first-generation adult Latinos report listening to music mostly in Spanish; in the second generation, this falls to 18 percent, and in the third generation, this falls to only 10 percent.

- A third misconception is that Latino English is the speech of youth gang members. But that's no truer of Latino English than it is of any other dialect of English. Some speakers of Latino English are young, and some of them are in gangs. But like any other full-fledged dialect, Latino English is used by a full range of speakers, of all ages and all types of social groups.
- Finally, we have to remember that Latino English is not “bad” English or “broken” English. It's regularly patterned and governed by unconscious rules, like all dialects, whether they're labeled as standard or nonstandard, or mistakenly held to be “substandard.”

Suggested Reading

Fought, *Chicano English in Context*.

Lipski, *Varieties of Spanish in the United States*.

Questions to Consider

1. Think about your own family's linguistic history. If you live in the United States, chances are that you have an immigrant background. Have your family's heritage languages been retained, or have they been lost over the generations? What kind of impact has language shift had on you and your family?
2. What would you say to someone who came up to you and said, "Why do Mexicans these days refuse to learn English? In my grandparents' day, everyone learned English. It was sink or swim. This is America; we speak English!" As you consider your response, you might want to do a bit of research on "sink or swim" methods of language teaching—technically called English-only immersion programs. Consider that many learners will be children, not adults, and that the type of language they need to master will be formal, academic, standard English, not just everyday English.

Where Is American English Headed?

Today, American Englishes are alive and well—in the United States and in the world. And just as the United States as a nation has changed the world's political and cultural landscape, so, too, has American English left an indelible imprint on the English language. At the same time, it doesn't seem likely that any one variety of English will ever crowd out the others. English has always been, and will continue to be, rich in internal linguistic diversity. Language, dialect, and identity are inextricably intertwined, and our distinctive identities and dialects are much too important for us to ever relinquish them in favor of a single global standard.

The History of American English

- Like America itself, American English has had a colorful history. It was born of various sources: British English dialects, dialect mixing, and contact between English and an array of other languages—Native American; western, northern, and eastern European; and West African.
- It had its growing pains. American English was disparaged when it first began to be noticed as an entity separate from British English. And for generations, English speakers in America oriented toward British norms, not American ways of speaking.
- American English and its speakers could also be cruel: English wiped out hundreds of Native American languages in the United States and suppressed generation after generation of immigrant languages.
- At the same time, American English has always been imaginative, expressive, and overall pretty democratic. The United States of America doesn't have an official language, and we don't have a language academy that dictates our standards. Our literary heroes are down to earth, and they celebrate the language of everyday life.
- And although many nonstandard American dialects have been unfairly stigmatized, in the long run, Americans like their diverse dialects. We

recognize them as symbols of cultural history and as expressions of personal, interpersonal, and group identity.

- In fact, over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st, dialect variation in the United States has actually been increasing—not decreasing. This might seem unexpected, given people’s increasing mobility, intercommunication, and Internet access, but if you think about it, it makes sense.
- America firmly established itself as a major player on the world stage over the past century and a half, and Americans became increasingly self-confident. The United States acquired Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines in the early 20th century, and as the century unfolded, America helped determine the outcomes of two World Wars.
- As its global position and sense of national identity became increasingly secure, America could focus more on its internal diversity. It had always been there, but now it could shine forth. Minority groups who fought in World War II came home with a heightened sense of their value to the United States, and the civil rights movement of the 1960s further bolstered a growing belief in the value of all of America’s various cultural groups.
- And one of the strongest, most recognizable symbols of cultural identity is language. So, as each of America’s myriad cultures increasingly asserted their own unique identity, they also asserted their language varieties—their heritage languages, their second-language varieties of English, and the natively spoken American English dialects associated with regional, ethnic, and community identities.
- In linguist Edgar Schneider’s terms, the 20th century marked the differentiation stage of American English—the phase characterized by the recognition

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and celebration of internal linguistic diversity. And American English dialects have been diversifying in many ways.

Regional Dialects: Vowel Shifts

- Sociolinguists William Labov, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg conducted a wide survey, published as *The Atlas of North American English* in 2006. They were interested in all levels of language variation: lexical, phonological, and grammatical. But their chief focus was phonology—pronunciation systems—in particular, the pronunciation systems of vowels.
- In general, we try to avoid potential meaning confusion when we talk, so we have a strategy for coping when one vowel sound encroaches on the vowel space of another. Linguists call this vowel shift. When one vowel begins to change in pronunciation, for whatever reason—ease of pronunciation or linguistic fashion, for example—other vowels may be pushed or pulled out of the way to keep vowels from collapsing together. This is what's known as a chain shift.
- Vowel shifts are not uncommon. English, as we know it today, was radically altered in the course of its history by a sweeping pronunciation change affecting all of its long vowels: the Great Vowel Shift. This took place sometime between 1350 and 1700. It's essentially what changed Middle English, the language of Chaucer's day, into Early Modern English, which in turn became today's Modern English.
- The Great Vowel Shift is also why many English spellings don't match their pronunciations. Many English spellings were fixed before or during the vowel shift and were never changed to reflect the later pronunciations.
- Radical changes in vowel systems have occurred before, and in the development of American regional dialect differences, vowel shifts are where the action is today. *The Atlas of North American English* identifies three major long-standing dialect regions in the eastern part of the United States: the North, the South, and the Midland. The

North and the South each have their own separate vowel systems, and they've actually shifted away from each other in recent decades.

Ethnic Dialect Distinctiveness

- Along with increasing regional differentiation, the 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a rise in ethnic dialect distinctiveness. The civil rights movement raised ethnic consciousness and bolstered ethnic pride. At the same time, it increased the focus on ethnicity-based languages and language varieties.
- African American English has probably always been quite different from white American dialects, but in some ways, it's become more different over the past few decades. Some of its best-known features rose to prominence in the 20th century, while other features are more recent.
- Some ethnic dialects are even undergoing revival, just when they seemed to be on the verge of fading away. One very interesting case is Cajun English. This is a variety of English that arose in Louisiana among second-language speakers of French and Louisiana Creole. This particular creole is a contact language created out of a number of different sources—several dialects of French, Native American languages, West African languages, and Spanish.
- Louisiana Creole and Louisiana French used to be pretty common in Louisiana, but they've gradually given way to English. But just like Creole and Cajun cuisines, Cajun English has a unique flavor. Some of its features are shared with other vernacular dialects, and like other dialects deriving from English as a second language, Cajun English has some different types of verb usages.
- Cajun English also has pronunciation features that are associated with second-language learning and with transfer from French. There's also a distinctive rhythm to Cajun English that's derived from French. Part of the rhythm involves different stress patterns. There are also English phrases that derive from the French phraseology.

- The French language is receding in Louisiana, so you might think that Cajun English would be fading away, too. Sociolinguist Sylvie Dubois and her colleagues studied the English of three generations of Cajuns, and they found that speakers' usage levels for features of Cajun English were lower for people in the middle age group than in the oldest generation. But, quite surprisingly, when the researchers turned to the youngest group in their study, they found that Cajun English had sprung back up.
- Why would this be? It turns out that the Cajun English linguistic renaissance corresponds with a cultural renaissance. For centuries, Cajun ethnic identity was looked down upon, even actively suppressed, but as the 20th century progressed, Cajun culture took on a positive value.
- So, Cajuns have revived Cajun English. The dialect still includes transfer features from French and from second-language English, but now these features are part of a native English dialect—and a big part of Cajun cultural identity.
- Dialects, big and small, are a part of community identity. The United States has always been a nation of diverse communities. In the early days, diversity was downplayed as the new nation developed a new American identity—and presented a united front to the outside world. But once that national identity was established, Americans could begin to express their internal diversity. And that's just what we're doing now, culturally and linguistically, as our regions, ethnic groups, and communities assert their distinctiveness.

Vowel shifts are not uncommon. English, as we know it today, was radically altered in the course of its history by a sweeping pronunciation change affecting all of its long vowels: the Great Vowel Shift.

The International Diversification of World Englishes

- The English language has definitely spread across the globe. Estimates vary, but one reliable source on world languages, called *Ethnologue*, lists approximately 840 million speakers of English around the world, including both native and nonnative speakers. That makes it the second most-spoken language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese, which has more than a billion speakers.
- Most of the world's English speakers are second-language speakers, and the norm for second-language English, by and large, is still British English. So, in a way, not much has changed since the early 1600s, when English-speaking colonists began moving to America but remained quite steadfastly oriented to British English. Of course, British English has changed a good bit in the past 400-plus years, but in many ways, it's still the standard for world Englishes.
- But American English is making some inroads. According to linguist Christian Mair, American English lexical norms are spreading. In fact, even since the earliest days of American English, American words—Americanisms—have traveled quickly beyond American soil. They've also had quite an impact on English in England, so it's not always easy to tell whether certain words are actually American or British.
- Some American grammatical forms are spreading through international Englishes, too, such as the regularization of irregular past tense forms. But pronunciation norms for international English learners are still almost always British.
- But no matter how widespread British English–based pronunciations might be, or how popular American words are, keep in mind that wherever English spreads, it diversifies. British English has sprouted American English, Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, South African English, and so on. And it continues to spawn new dialects that are quite different from more established varieties.
- And American English is now giving rise to new world Englishes, too. Filipino English was born of American roots, not British ones, when

America took over the Philippines from Spain in the late 1800s. The new American-based dialect sprang up quickly and quite purposefully. The U.S. government actively promoted American English in their new territory—for example, by installing teachers from America in Filipino classrooms.

- The international diversification of world Englishes continues, and so does intranational differentiation. This is true for English-speaking countries around the world, and even for England, the birthplace of the English language, and the home of its most “proper” standards. New dialects are still cropping up there today.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *English as a Global Language*.

Mair, *Twentieth-Century English*.

Questions to Consider

1. We’ve talked in detail about the forces at work in the continuing diversification of English dialects as English develops in America and spreads across the world. What forces help keep English together as a single language?
2. Since at least the early 20th century, linguists, educators, and others have promoted various forms of “international English.” Do you think there could ever be a single global standard for English? If so, would it be based on American English, British English, or some other norm? Forms of “learning English” or “simple English” are used today by organizations such as the Voice of America and Wikipedia. Are such forms of “learner English” useful? Could they hinder the acquisition of full competence in English by second-language learners? Could they have a detrimental effect on the English of native speakers?

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Cassidy, Frederic G., and Joan Houston Hall, gen. eds. *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Vols. 1–6 (1985, 1991, 1996, 2002, 2012, 2013). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. This is an endlessly fascinating and entertaining collection of American lexical items whose distributions pattern along regional and/or social lines. Entries include quotations

through which the origin, development, and spread of the various items can be traced, and there are also numerous maps depicting regional distributions. The set includes an introduction outlining the linguistic processes underlying dialect variation and an engaging discussion of the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)* dictionary-making project. The work is available in reference libraries. Readers can also learn about the dictionary project and investigate a number of sample entries, many with maps, on the *DARE* website: <http://dare.wisc.edu>.

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Harrison, K. David. *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World's Most Endangered Languages*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2010. In this work, the author chronicles his journeys across the globe to meet with the last speakers of a range of endangered languages. Along the way, he demonstrates the urgency of the language endangerment epidemic that is sweeping the globe and illustrates through narratives, interviews, and photos the cultural and personal losses that linguistic loss entails. This book is at once a fascinating discussion of language and linguistic variety and a compelling and moving travelogue.

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including Cuban and Puerto Rican Spanish, as well as the traditional varieties that were already in place when English-speaking colonists first began establishing settlements in America. Each variety is described in terms of its historical background, current demographic information, linguistic characteristics, and sociocultural context. Discussions of contact with English and of different varieties of Spanish with one another is also included, as is consideration of “Spanglish”: Spanish-English code-switching. The book demonstrates the validity, rich variety, and linguistic and cultural importance of Spanish in the United States in the face of continuing onslaughts by proponents of English-only legislation and policies. It is valuable reading for scholars in a range of fields and for anyone interested in learning more about what has been and continues to be one of the key languages in America.

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———. *Hoi Toide on the Outer Banks: The Story of the Ocracoke Brogue*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997. This book for general audiences is an enjoyable account of the dialect of Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, whose residents are often called “hoi toiders” for their distinctive pronunciation of the “i” vowel in words like “high” and “tide.” The book includes chapters on the history of the Ocracoke community and its language variety, the pronunciations and grammatical structures of the Ocracoke dialect, and island stories. There is also discussion of whether Ocracoke English can be maintained in the face of the influx of tourists and new residents who flock to the island community for its natural beauty and warm sense of community.

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